

関村イムヤ

ILLUSTRATION 山下ナナオ



悪役転生^{だけど} どうして こうなった。

2

ガール、その存在は、今もなお
胸に突き刺さる程に。
お前は何処にいる？

男装の麗人が送る、異色の乙女ゲー転生物語の第二巻！

ここでもしか読めない！ 分岐ルート&描き下ろしエピソード満載

I Reincarnated as a Noble Girl Villainess But Why Did It Turn Out This Way?

– Akuyaku Tensei Dakedo Doushite Kou Natta –

**- Volume 2 -
Assemblage**

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Priest Faris

テレジア伯爵と旧知である
アール・クシャ教の神官。王
族の祭祀場であるシャナク
神殿の宮司(最高権力者)。

Teomer

カルディア領の新入領民
の取りまとめ役。シル族
の中で最も若い氏長。

Earl Terejia

エリザの後見人。
カルディア領の領
主代行を務める。

Gunther

カルディア領軍の
兵士。実質的な領
軍のリーダー格。

Eliza Kaldia (13 years old)

異世界で生きた女の記憶を持って生まれ、それ故に別
の運命を辿る事になった少女。カルディア領の領主を
務めており、伯爵の身分を持つ。

Claudia Rolentsor

エリザの遊び相手兼護衛として王都
から招かれた娘。

Ratoka

カルディア領の孤児。エリザに対する反
逆罪で処刑された事になっており、現在
は名を変え存在を隠匿されている。

Eliza Kaldia (7yrs. old)

幼い頃のエリザであり、この物語
の主人公。カミルを失って傷心し
たまま、テレジア伯爵の下、領主
としての仕事に追われている。

登場人物



Molton Domain?

Fushobari Region

Ugaria Region

Artsbelf Region

Marquis Nordsturm's Northern faction

Royal Capital

Arxia Kingdom

Amon Albus

Amon Nor

Stadel Domain

Henznaut Domain

Kaldia Domain

Jugfena Royal Domain

Jugfena Region

Monster Forest

Genas Domain? (Ex-Galbaito)

Rogshia Domain?

Greenfield Region

Freche Domain

Freche Region

Ruktoferd Domain

Amon Karan

Ex-Artolas (now Densel)

Bandishia Plateau

Parmigram Dukedom

Densel Dukedom

Rindarl Union

Planates Dukedom

Giograd Dukedom

Various Lesser Countries

Pactoshiki?



【 PART I 】

CHAPTER 70

TWO VIEWPOINTS

(This chapter returns to Eliza's point of view.)

I believe that games, books, manga, anime, TV shows, movies, all these things created solely for entertainment purposes are basically so that we can obtain some sort of catharsis. As an example, in my previous life, due to my younger sister's recommendation, I tried a certain otome game.

Helping other people from the heroine's perspective, improving your character by raising your level and stats, and enjoying the drama between the characters.

You can romance handsome, high-spec boys, or even, during that process defeat your love rivals.

With it, you obtain a sense of superiority and satisfaction.

In a medieval European fantasy setting, made of fluffy images, the heroine is able to meet male capture targets filled with various female ideals, although this was all very lacking in realism. Once again, this must purely be for entertainment purposes, as the characters' archetypes were rather exaggerated and very shallow.

The otome game was quite detailed, and it felt deeper than most stories. Just like the original meaning of the word catharsis, it might have been intended to purify the emotions of pity and fear through art.

However, all I know is that it wasn't the case for me.

The heroine was someone that had come from the neighboring country, to go to noble school and look for a husband candidate from among the students, and she would romance them, that was the story.

It didn't depict anything about the brutality and filthiness of human beings, there was nothing in it obstructing people from obtaining catharsis.



I looked around at the earth which was stained with blood. Dead bodies which were unrecognizable, were piled up like garbage.

Military forces between countries had fought here. Humans had caused so much death and destruction.

Why had they fought, why were so many lives sacrificed, the dead would obtain nothing.

There was nothing such as celebration wine to be seen around here.

This was another side to the game world where the heroine was the neighboring country's archduke's daughter and had come to noble school to have fun and find romance. This type of scene had never appeared in the game, yet there were indeed pools of blood everywhere.

There's no such reason like people attempting to obtain catharsis here, there was only people killing each other, and dying. Or, there's no story-like qualities here, only people fighting with all their strength.

People aren't very principled, it's a world where people attack others based on their feelings and desires.

Even though I know that, still, this world is nothing like the game settings at all, only the stage is the same while a war began, I got the ridiculous idea wondering if this was reality at all.

I was simply scared.

Is this world real or fake? Am I just dreaming?

Indeed, my feelings of memories of a past life were fading.

Why did I kill people for, I wonder. Why do people die, I wonder.

Are people's deaths meaningless, I wonder.

I wonder if I would have been happier had I not recalled my past life's memories. If I didn't know the game's story from my past life's memories, would this war have not started, I wonder.

Even if I think about it, I have no answers. That's all I understand.

I just keep telling myself that it's probably for the best that I don't understand anything.

Is this world just a game world from my previous life, I wonder.

Or, is this reality with breathing, living people, I wonder.

I can't decide if this is reality or not, even though technically this isn't supposed to be something that I can just leave undecided.

That's why, maybe I have no choice but to accept, that I can't make a choice between the two.

CHAPTER 71

RITE OF PASSAGE

In any society, it seems that there's various different rites of passage.

I'm at the head temple of the Ar Xia church, the Great Shrine of Misorua, which basically surrounds the royal palace here in the royal capital. I've been kneeling in the dark for some time, thinking about various things instead of the confession I'm supposed to be doing.

In the Arxia Kingdom, this is a rite of passage for seven year olds, a turning point in one's life. This is also the age at which one can be punished for one's own crimes under the law. Meaning, I'm supposed to make an oath to follow the laws of Xia for the rest of my life, and I shall take the responsibility for being punished in accordance with the law if I break any laws.

While commoner children can just go to wherever the closest church is and listen to a recitation of the contents of the Sacred Code, it's different for nobles.

I had to schedule a date beforehand with the Great Shrine of Misorua for the ritual, and perform a purification ceremony by myself in a dark room by confessing for half a day. After that, I have to recite a passage from the Sacred Code, and swear to protect and uphold the law in front of the god Misorua and the priests.

At the same time, this ritual is also meant to formally induct me as a member of the Ar Xia church.

Before seven, I'm only considered an interim member. Well, there's a very high proportion of children that die before reaching seven, and children aren't considered to know right from wrong here until they're seven years old.

Thanks to various detailed memories from my previous life, I felt like everything religion related seemed really shady, and I didn't believe in it at all. Spending half a day shut inside a dark room, I found this confession thing to be rather ridiculous, and I merely remained here in silence.

Whether or not the god Misorua exists, I don't care either way at all. Even if I belong to the Ar Xia church, whether or not I really believe in what they preach isn't important at all. What's important is keeping up appearances and going along with society.

Six months ago, when I kept sleeping constantly for an entire month, I kept dreaming about things from my previous life.

I recalled many things that I had once forgotten. But, rather than feeling like it was something that happened to myself in the past, it felt more like I was reading a book with someone else as the protagonist, or maybe a ghost whispering information to me.

I'm currently Eliza Kaldia from the Arxia Kingdom, not a young girl that used to live in Japan.

In the darkness, although I took a pious pose of reflecting on my past sins, I mostly spent the time saying my farewells to and making a break from my past life.



After the time allotted for confession finally finished, I looked around the main hall of the Great Shrine for a while. My guardian, Earl Terejia had come along with me to the Great Shrine, but he has his uses.

We're finally supposed to be able to invite a bishop that can hold church rituals to my domain. To keep track of the bishop's movements, for the necessary paperwork, and the conditions that would need to be agreed on, this is where the earl comes in. By the way, although the term bishop reminded me of high-ranking clergymen from my past life, here in Arxia it just refers to a much more general educator. Bishops are responsible for teaching reading and writing.

A priest guided me into the shrine's main hall. When I entered, I was struck by the extravagance and magnificence of what was before me. There were exquisite stone sculptures of unrivaled craftsmanship on wooden pedestals and there was also two fountains of flowing water by the main platform. The ceiling had large panes of stained glass in flower shapes, giving the inside of the church an amazing array of colors.

On top of the a main platform was an altar to honor the remains of St. Ahar, and even more surprisingly there was a spring coming from it. The water flowing from it was enclosed by a circle of stones, and a coffin was placed in the center.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it.”

The priest guiding me seemed to be quite proud of it all. I could only nod in agreement. Seeing such beautiful construction, I haven’t ever seen anything like this even in my previous life.

I finally looked away from all the splendor, and started focusing on the priests here. The priest next to me watched me in silence. It feels like he might watch me like this for quite a while, to the point of boredom.

Then, as I looked around at the fine details of the craftsmanship on the ceiling and floor, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Oh my, aren’t you..... the Kaldia girl?”

It was a voice that sounded neither young nor old, neither male or female, a very mysterious voice. It sounded familiar. When I turned around, it was a person dressed in white priestly garments.

“Priest Faris-!”

“It seems that you’re about to swear your oath. Although, you have quite a terrible expression for someone going through their purification ceremony and confession...”

This is the priest that presided over my birthday celebration last spring, Faris had an ambiguous smile. Although I haven’t seen Faris in over a year, there’s no change in Faris’s appearance, and my cheek involuntarily twitched at this priest’s appearance.

“.....Well, I guess it’s because you have to shoulder such a terrible burden when you’re still so young.”

Is something funny about all this, that you’re making snarky comments, and don’t touch my shoulder like that without permission.

This enigmatic priest, I can’t tell what he or she is thinking at all, yet somehow Faris always seems like he or she can see straight into my heart, I felt extremely unsettled.

“Head Priest-sama, please don’t tease Viscountess Kaldia so much.....”

The priest guiding me remonstrated Faris. Priest Faris shrugged lightly, and headed for the altar.

CHAPTER 72

CHILD'S GAME

When I finally woke up last year in autumn after a full month of sleeping, I had a lot of work to catch up on even though I was still recovering. Now that six months have passed since then, things have finally settled down.

Also, because of the battle at Fort Jugfena and me being asleep an entire month, the refugee acceptance plan has gone way off track. Originally, starting in summer, we were supposed to start by accepting 50 refugees in the first month. In the end, we were supposed to receive around 1200 new citizens, but because most of the refugees at Fort Jugfena had been killed, in the end Kaldia is only going to gain about 300 new citizens from the refugees.

Also, as for the Shiru tribe, they were much more in number than what I had assumed. At first I had heard that there would be about 40 of them, but even if there were three times that number, with 120 of them, integration should still be reasonably achievable.

However, in the end there had still been 300 of them hiding in the Bandishia Plateau that ended up joining me, a much larger number than expected. It's quite impressive that so many of them were able to shake off such a large pursuing Densel force for over a month.

Together, it's 600 new citizens, but it's still only half the original number of new citizens that were supposed to have joined. They were supposed to help in constructing the new village as well, but with this I'm going to have to redo my plans from scratch.

After all, half of them are the Shiru tribe, who are nomadic, meaning they roam often and don't stay in one location for very long, so they have very little knowledge in construction. And on top of that, they're also not very well versed in agriculture and farming.

Having come west of the Bandishia Plateau to Kaldia, they're going to have to adjust their lifestyles and construct homes for themselves. Usually it seems that they construct homes from the earth and stone rather than wood. Unfortunately, stone as a building material in Kaldia..... is almost nonexistent.

Since I don't have the time or money, for now all I can do is supply wood as building materials. Also, I'm having clay prepared, to be made into bricks.

Although I also hope to attract people to immigrate to my domain, it's only a slight hope, first I still have to work my way through this current problem.

What's more, because the person in charge of overseeing the village construction was Kamil who passed away, there's the issue of who to put in charge from now on. Finding someone from here that knows how to speak the Artolan language, so that mutual understanding can be easily achieved for everyone to work together, seems very difficult to do.

There had also been 30 soldiers originally helping with the village construction, but 20 had been recalled to go to Fort Jugfena's battle and there were only 10 working there still. Although I had mentally prepared myself that this may happen, due to the casualties suffered in that battle, now we no longer have enough surplus troops to send soldiers to help aid the construction again.

In the end, I decided to move the village construction farther west, much closer to the area under my direct control in the Kaldia domain. It's become that things are now moving ahead of schedule.

Also, just because I was asleep for a month doesn't mean that there was no paperwork to be done during that time, after the battle I had to repeatedly go back and forth between Kaldia and the royal capital, with no time to rest because too much work had piled up.

– The above just took me about thirty minutes to explain to Ratoka who was glaring at me. Finally, he spoke up with a sulk.

“So, you're saying you were so busy that you completely forgot about me.”

His voice, while calm, definitely sounded angry and cold. I feel like it might almost be better if he were screaming and yelling at me instead.

“No, it's just that I had a lot of work to finish before I could meet up with you, that's what I just explained.”

“Is that something you say to someone you've barely talked to and left alone for almost a year?”

While I haven't talked to him much lately, his education has still been continuing, so his words have gotten more eloquent. His red eyes and even gestures are so similar to mine, it's definitely caught my interest.

".....Even if you say I left you alone, I don't have a use for you right now."

When those words left my mouth, a vein started bulging on his forehead.

"Or maybe, could it be, you wanted attention from me even though I'm younger?"

"Do you want to get beaten up!!"

"Whoops, be careful not to let disrespectful words slip out there."

As I watched Ratoka, also known as "Elise," I couldn't help but let out a laugh at his face turning red in anger and frustration. Being snarky towards him as a form of stress release, why did I develop this kind of habit, I wonder.

I dodged his fist that was aimed at my shoulder, and I felt a nostalgic feeling like I was in the barracks, exchanging banter with the soldiers.

CHAPTER 73

A DOLL AND A SECRET LETTER

“.....What exactly is this?”

Maybe because I had been so stupefied, those words accidentally slipped out. I had just heard something so unexpected, that I just kept staring at Earl Terejia in a daze.

“You’ll have to play together with Elise-dono.”

Earl Terejia’s calm voice crushed my feelings of wanting to escape. Once again, I took a good look at what was in my hand.

It was an elaborate, beautifully made girl doll, but it was creepily deformed by an indescribable smile on it.

I wondered just how much gold it would take to make those golden clothes the doll was wearing in real life size, as I admired the excessiveness of the doll’s extravagant clothing. After all, the amount of frilliness on it was dreadful to behold.

This doll in my hand was a gift from the father of the noble girl currently staying here at my mansion, Elise’s father Baron Sherstok. The baron had even went to the trouble of gifting me a set of two dolls with different designs. This was the meaning behind Earl Terejia’s words just earlier, “you’ll have to play together with Elise-dono.”

Although Elise had come over to Kaldia in order to recuperate from her illness, in name she was also my guest and playmate. But up until now, we’ve never really played, and only visited each other. While Elise is indeed a bit sickly, it’s more of that I’ve simply been so busy that I haven’t been able to spare the time to accompany her.

However, Baron Sherstok wouldn’t know such a thing. The baron is one of those nobles without land of his own, so he basically has very little to do with high noble society, and he wouldn’t know how busy I am or that I have zero interest in dolls.

That said, giving a doll as a gift to his ten year old daughter Elise, this is a very common type of present. In the eyes of most people, I’m probably more of the odd one for not taking the time to play.

Knowing my personal preferences on dolls, Earl Terejia perfunctorily left the office. Left alone, I glanced again at the glittering, sparkly doll.

What do I do, with this. Am I supposed to play with it.

I held its head, and kept wondering what to do.

.....In short, Elise is supposed to play with this, I wonder if I should find some playmates for her. I'd think that I don't necessarily have to be the person playing with her.

While thinking about passing that role on to Ratoka, I started playing with the thick skirt on the doll. Without a doubt, the doll's costume was overly extravagant, and the embroidery was so fine that I could barely see the stitches connecting the cloth together. A golden rose was sewn neatly into the top of the skirt, reflecting the sunlight prettily.

".....Mm,"

The more I looked at it, the more I felt like something was slightly off about the embroidery. I kept turning the doll around in my hands, and one part just seemed slightly different.

I flipped up the skirt and checked underneath, and as expected the same type of embroidery was underneath it as well. While I tilted my head and wondered just what it was about this embroidery that seemed strange, I suddenly realized that it seemed almost like it was in the shape of letters of the alphabet.

When I started trying to read it, although it was a bit difficult due to the tiny size and a lack of spaces, it seems that it was an actual message.



"I see, so it was a secret letter."

Earl Terejia read the message that I wrote down for him on a piece of paper.

"It would seem that this rose is a sign to check for a hidden message. Since Elise usually doesn't come out of her room while she's recuperating from her illness here, it seems

that Viscount Stadel must have developed these codes and hidden messages for her as a game.”

Elise’s uncle, Viscount Stadel, especially dotes on her as she used to be in such poor health that she couldn’t even get out of bed on some days. I had heard from Elise herself before that he always tried to think of fun things for her to do to escape the boredom of always being confined to bed, that didn’t require her to leave her room.

Since Viscount Stadel doesn’t have any children of his own, maybe he’s pouring out all his affection for his niece. Also, probably due to Elise’s weak body, maybe he’s become a little overprotective. That Elise could grow up so innocently in such an environment, I felt a strange sense of admiration.

“And, did you understand what was written there?”

“Yes. If I add in punctuation and spacing, it’s not so hard. It’s a warning about the movements of the northern nobles.”

At hearing about the northern nobles, Earl Terejia frowned slightly in annoyance.

“I hear that some extremist organizations have been gathering around the northern nobles’ leader, Marquis Nordsturm’s family lately.”

“How foolish. They’re trying to attack Kaldia politically, and make us return the money given to us for the refugees.....”

The earl sighed deeply, seeming worn out.

If I think about it calmly, I can organize my emotions. I’m thankful to Viscount Stadel for the information, although I don’t welcome bad news. It’s just that right now, there’s a shortage of labor in Kaldia.

I recalled the malevolent gazes of the northern nobles last time I met them at the House of Lords, and the depressing atmosphere caused by them. While I haven’t verified the contents of this secret letter yet, I definitely believe that I can trust it.

CHAPTER 74

IN A HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGE

I've caught the attention of a troublesome opponent, I sighed mentally.

The Nordsturm family is a major noble family from the north, and their current family head is Marquis Nordsturm. Three generations ago, they had also been married to royalty, so they still have quite the connections in the royal capital as well.

Although they have a bad reputation from the fact that their power comes from the moneylending business, because of it very few nobles dare to go against them. What's more, many of the northern nobles are related to the Nordsturms by being one of their branch families or through marriage in some way, so their influence in northern Arxia is even greater than that of the royal family.

At one time, the north had been treated as the least important part of Arxia. There was the Amon Nor Mountains forming a natural barrier with the eastern countries, and there was nothing but rough sea waves on the northern border, both of these geographical attributes contributed to making the north a formidable natural fortress.

It was a bad location for conducting trade on the seas. Although it's possible to travel east to other countries farther down, a large section of the coastline bordering Arxia's is controlled by Densel, or belongs to the Rindarl Union that opposes us. Their naval technologies weren't very far advanced either.

The earth was frozen over in many places, and even what wasn't frozen over was very poor land for raising crops, so it was overall a very poor region.

Because of that, the Nordsturm family has been the only noble family ever since Arxia was founded that's ruled in the north. Because talented people would be placed in more important places to make use of their skills at governing, no aristocrats were ever sent to the north.

Of course, ruling over the vast north would be impossible for only the family head, so the Nordsturm family divided the northern lands among its own family members, and starting from about one hundred and twenty years ago, their current governing

system is basically a group of lords that all report to the leader of the Nordsturm family.

For the Nordsturm family who has such power in the north to still have good relations with the royal family, it's simply because of money. First of all, the Nordsturms are talented at making money in the north. Their most prosperous city is the city where the marquis currently resides, it's a place where people and goods gather.

Next, the north helps with the country's military spending every year even though it benefits them the least. They also have vast sums of money stored away, and they've recently started lending money to their neighboring domains, and simply the interest on the loans were already more than sufficient already to cover all the north's expenses for governing their territory.

I remembered how Earl Terejia had taught me that a member of the royalty had gotten married to a Nordsturm as a political sacrificial pawn, in order to obtain part of the Nordsturm family's wealth for the sake of the country.

There are two royal families in Arxia, meant to be as a measure for keeping the throne out of the reach of any other non-royal family. A daughter from the current royal family that isn't on the throne, the Melloart family, had married a Nordsturm in exchange for one third of the Nordsturm family's wealth being donated to the national treasury. Earl Terejia had told me that it was a story he heard from his older brother Marquis Rittergau who's working in the royal palace as the prime minister of Arxia, so it must be true.

Their wealth had been reduced, and the Nordsturms also attracted the hostility of other nobles in Arxia with connections to the royalty. I want them to just take a break and ignore me, but it seems there's no helping it.

In the first place, the reason why I attracted their attention was because half of the entire defense budget financed by the north was allotted to only three domains, which were Kaldia, Jugfena, and Genas, the eastern border domains. Any funds that were not used for the sake of defense were supposed to be properly returned to the House of Lords.

The northern nobles are taking it out on only Kaldia, meaning me, as Earl Einsbark who's in charge of the Jugfena domain and Margrave Genas are too powerful for them

to attack politically, so out of simple spite, or maybe picking on weaklings, they're taking it out on me for being a financial beneficiary of their funds.

"I'm actually relieved to see that gloomy expression of yours finally returning."

As the horse-drawn carriage clattered and shook, Earl Terejia who was sitting across from me said so with a snort from his nose. Claudia sitting next to him also nodded in agreement.

"At any rate, let's settle this problem quickly. Jugfena and Genas have organized their own domains much faster and better than Kaldia, that's because Earl Terejia has been deciding policy matters in my place up until now. For the Nordsturm family that isn't well armed militarily, they would gain nothing from moving against all three of the Terejia, Genas, and Einsbark families at once."

"The Nordsturm family should be aware of that as well. Still, saying something like moving against all three families, does this mean that you see a way to cooperate with the other families?"

What I'm concerned about right now is, the factions other than the Nordsturm family.

The Nordsturm family doesn't actually have much power other than lots of money and the support of the northern nobles. That alone wouldn't be a threat by itself. However, depending on who allies with whom, things could get a lot more troublesome. I think the problem lies in how the Nordsturm family utilizes their vast fortune.

"If the Nordsturms seriously attempted it, do you think they have enough power to overthrow the current government?"

Earl Terejia raised his eyebrows greatly at my question. Since the north regularly finances the other domains with their extra funds, decided through meetings at the House of Lords, it means they get more of a say in issues compared to the rest of the nobility. Meaning, they already control much of national policy.

By the way, the House of Lords only consists of domain lords with the rank of viscount or higher, and court aristocrats with the rank of earl or higher. Lower ranked nobles are supposed to be represented by nobles higher-ranking than they are. It's like how I used to not attend meetings at the House of Lords, as Earl Terejia attended them for me on my behalf.

“I don’t think they would try something like that though, would the conservative northern nobles really rebel against a decision made by the House of Lords?”

I answered my own question, and the earl nodded in assent. Although the northern nobles are conservative in a different sense from the court aristocracy, I think that they wouldn’t want to take any risks that would end up lessening their influence.

Since the Nordsturm family currently seems to be gathering power right now, I definitely think it would be for the better if I think of something I can use against them first. It never hurts to be wary.

Earl Terejia unexpectedly looked out the window. While watching the scenery pass by, he was probably thinking about something. Our conversation ended as well when the earl looked away. Because there’s many things to be worried about, both of us are probably thinking about things regarding the northern nobles that we’re going to have to deal with someday.

However.

“.....The Nordsturm family’s time may be unexpectedly ending soon, to be replaced by someone else.”

Earl Terejia suddenly said that out loud after a while. Is this some sort of prophecy, once again I confirmed to myself that the earl is quite terrifying.

CHAPTER 75

TOWNHOUSE

The rocky, clattering horse-drawn carriage took two days to finally arrive at its destination. In the outermost section of the nobles' living quarters in the royal capital, separated from the commoners' quarters by a single fence, we stopped at a timeworn small townhouse. It was much shorter than the two story mansion that I live in, and I barely even need to lift my head to look up.

"We're here....."

A sigh slipped out from Earl Terejia. Then, he looked at me.

"You, is this really fine?"

"It's just a place to stay at while we're in the royal capital anyways."

The earl shrugged, and looked back at the townhouse distastefully. This townhouse is the first thing that I've ever bought for myself in this life, meaning, it was also a bit small and narrow.



After the battle at Fort Jugfena, although dealing with the aftermath of that battle was finally over, I'm still quite busy and have to go between my domain and the royal capital quite often. Since the House of Lords has regular meetings in summer and autumn, it's a bustling social season at the royal capital. Most nobles with their own domains also have mansions in the royal capital, and this could be a good opportunity to deepen my network of contacts.

Especially from mid-summer to autumn, there's quite a lot of events that gather many people, such as social debuts for newcomers, dance balls, and church festivals.

Of course, although Earl Terejia is already a very experienced court aristocrat, I haven't even reached adult age yet, let alone made my social debut, so it should still be about a decade before those social events have anything to do with me.

.....Although that's how it should have been, contrary to all that there was actually a mountain of invitations from various nobles piled up back home in the domain lord's office. The reason was simply that everyone wanted to get acquainted with me to establish a useful contact for future negotiations.

Because of the four eastern dukedoms combining to become the Rindarl Union, and the unprovoked attack from Densel, we were on the highest level of alert against them. Of course, domestic attention was also on the eastern domains that bordered the enemy, the domains of Kaldia, Jugfena, and Genas.

The House of Lords was giving these three domains extra financial support, but now the system of payments to us was being re-organized, as some of the domain lords were now moving to have some of that money returned.

Since there was so much attention on our domains, it's also opened up new market opportunities for Jugfena and Genas, as well as Kaldia, for being the country's first line of defense. Due to all the military equipment and facilities that must be made, as well as the large number of goods that the new citizens would need, that's why so many nobles have all sent me their invitations.

In short, every domain wants new trade opportunities.

Although it was a bit of a superfluous rule, in Arxia there's a custom that children that haven't reached adult age yet shouldn't attend social events other than ones that they're hosting, as a matter of etiquette. However, because I'm a domain lord before I'm a child, there's a relentless number of invitations being sent my way. Usually, it would be the reverse, where someone is a child before they're a noble.

.....Because of my circumstances, I now have a full schedule of luncheon and evening meetings every day. It's actually a bit hard on my body as I'm still quite young, but I won't say a single word of complaint. I don't have anyone to complain to anyways.

So that I don't always have to stay at Earl Terejia's place whenever I visit the royal capital, I bought this tiny house on the very outskirts of the noble area.

It does seem to be rather decayed, but well, because I don't have to stay here for very long each time, it doesn't matter. I don't care about the outside, I've already had the interior fixed up.

I sank myself into a non brand name, cheap, yet still well made sofa, and I looked at the exposed red bricks and wood that seemed to give a feeling of warmth to the plaster walls, I think I like it.

“Elise, give me my schedule for tonight and tomorrow.”

“Uh,ah. Tonight, you’re organizing documents in the office.Tomorrow, during the day..... The tailor is coming over to take measurements. Tomorrow evening, um, you’re attending Margrave Molton’s party.”

When I pestered Ratoka who had been forced to stand beside me in maid attire, he read off my schedule he was holding to me in a fluster. Recently Bellway had been teaching him various things he needed to know to attend to me.

I mostly intended to make Ratoka into a personal maid, rather than a personal attendant, but if he knows how to do more things, that’s pretty convenient too. Although doing this does seem to have added to his dislike of me, but little by little, it feels like things have gotten more informal between us.

“The day after tomorrow it seems that you have a Sacred Code study session at the church. Also, there’s luggage to be organized in the office still, what should we do?”

“I’ll go after I’m done drinking my tea.”

“.....Your tea you say, but what about your maid?”

“You’re so dense. That means you should go right now.”

“Ahh..... So that’s it.”

Ratoka nodded, although he still had an expression that didn’t quite seem convinced.

He turned around, and left while walking awkwardly, still unused to the heels and skirt he was wearing, and he passed by Claudia who was leaning against the wall next to the fireplace on his way out, sighing slightly at what he had to endure from me.

She met my gaze and didn’t even try to conceal that she was laughing, still giggling as she shrugged her shoulders lightly at me.

“.....What is it.”

“Nothing, I just thought that you’re having quite a lot of fun with him.”

Claudia had continued to remain being my bodyguard, but since at the mansion I would have other guards as well, this is actually the first time that she’s seen me interacting with Ratoka.

“When Ellusia-dono is talking with him, you seem quite surprisingly lively. As expected, it must be because of something like you two being close in age?”

“Well..... I wonder. Also, it’s not Ellusia, it’s Eliza.”

“Mm, I got it wrong again. Sorry.”

Somehow, I don’t think it’s because that I’m close in age to him. What’s more, why is it that I treat only Ratoka so casually, I can’t even say for myself why that is.

“However, when I look at you like this, not only do you seem surprisingly lively, you also seem to be having fun, and even give off the impression of relaxing a little. How should I describe it.....”

Claudia seemed lost for words, and began muttering to herself. It seems that she isn’t going to say anything else to me, so I turned towards the window to look outside.

On the other side of the window glass was the sky tinted a shade of red. It gets dark later here in the royal capital than in Kaldia, it would have been completely dark at this same time in Kaldia already.

What remained the same in the royal capital as Kaldia, was that the lights here were also candlelight as well. It’s too expensive to use anything else after sunset.

Just like I declared earlier, I headed to the office as well after finishing my cup of tea. That said, all I’m going to do, is organize what’s on the desk so that it’s more convenient for me to use, and I finished immediately.

When I looked back at Claudia I realized she was no longer talking to herself. She was looking directly at me with those sky blue eyes of hers, with a difficult to describe, somewhat wondrous expression on her face. I didn’t know what to say to that reaction of hers, so I couldn’t help but freeze up.

I just stayed like that and blinked several times.

“Ahh, that’s it! It feels like Eliza-dono is finally opening her heart, and calming down. When the person I’m supposed to be protecting isn’t wary, then I’m not wary either.”

Suddenly Claudia said that out loud with an extremely self-satisfied expression on her face, while I felt as if my chest was freezing over, even though I knew it was an illusion.

“.....Eliza-dono, what’s that matter? It couldn’t be, did I get your name wrong again!?”

“.....No, that’s not it.”

Even though my frozen muscles were protesting, I somehow managed to squeeze those words out of me. Her words had made me realize just what I was feeling, which really made me want to groan out loud.

CHAPTER 76

APPLE JUICE

“Hey, it’s been a long time, Viscountess Kaldia. Thank you for coming today.”

“Thank you very much for inviting me here as well, Lord Molton.”

I had great difficulty as I was currently struggling with wearing a formal dress for the first time, as I greeted tonight’s host, accompanied by Claudia who was dressed in maid attire. The beautiful margrave that I met last year was standing in the back of the dining hall, and after he saw me, he stumbled quite a bit over his words.

“It looks like you’re wearing a dress this time. It looks really good on you. While you looked quite cool and dignified in knightly attire before, you also really impress when you look feminine as well, and show off your strength.”

Margrave Molton gently gave his opinion of me in my dress. I’ve always worn knightly attire before when out in public, so this time I could definitely feel that I was the center of attention of all the nobles.

“And how should I interpret that?”

“I don’t mean anything bad by it. I’m not trying to insult you, I think it’s proof that you’re reliable.”

As typical of him, he was laughing happily, and his silver hair was shaking slightly. I feel a bit relieved that I can read his intentions so easily without any misunderstandings.

“How’s Earl Terejia been doing lately?”

“That’s..... He doesn’t seem to be feeling so well..... It’s just a little fatigue though.”

With his work as my regent combined with all these daily social events, and two full days of riding on a horse-drawn carriage definitely seems to be taking its toll on him. Even I think that he’s been overworking himself, but still there’s so much work that only he can do. We definitely need to hire more people, there’s no doubt about that.

Margrave Molton looked around at the table behind him, and took two wine glasses. Then, he poured a liquid that resembled white wine from a bottle.

When I took the glass he offered me, I saw that he was apparently offering me apple juice. I couldn't help but look up at him, only to see the margrave smiling elegantly at me. Out of all the social events I've been invited to, attending so many that I've lost count, this is the first time that someone's specially prepared a drink suitable for children – meaning me.

I definitely believe he's praiseworthy. It's not just that he has a son the same age as me, he treats me with kindness and without any prejudice, even though I'm the daughter of the Kaldia family.

My notorious father and family have left quite a dark stain on my name. They were considered apostates, the scourge of the nobility. Although it wasn't a formal decision by the House of Lords or anything, the northern nobles and those in agreement with them definitely think so inside.

We toasted each other and gulped down the contents of our glasses. It was refreshingly sweet with just a tinge of sourness to it, it reminded me of the apple juice that I liked to drink as well in my previous life.

Margrave Molton pulled two chairs over for Claudia and I, and even served Claudia a glass of juice as well.

It's still a bit early for dinner, but there are refreshments and snacks. People are also resting here from the dancing they're doing in the hall.

Since the margrave pulled a chair over personally for me, it would be rude to decline to sit down. Claudia and I both sat down facing the margrave.

".....Come to think of it, I haven't seen your personal attendant lately."

He's probably referring to all the times we've met before at other social events. The margrave looked at Claudia for a moment, then looked back at me.

He's asking about Kamil. The moment I thought about him, I recalled the bloody figure of Kamil in the back of my mind.

The sound that was made as Claudia put her glass down next to me was tiny, but I heard it very clearly. Margrave Molton's beautiful smile disappeared instantly at my next comment.

"He died at Jugfena."

My voice was shivering as I said the words so directly. My lips were trembling ever so slightly.

"That's,"

The margrave probably noticed my emotions. His voice sounded a bit strained as well.

".....My apologies. Sorry for bringing up something unpleasant."

He said it in a simple tone of voice and his expression was full of compassion. He probably saw a child similar to his son in me.

I lifted my glass, and had another mouthful of juice. My throat had dried up without my realizing it, so I had a second helping, then a third.

Suddenly, I felt pity for the margrave as well. I wonder if he's realized now that children as young as his son are dying in war. And if that's the case, just how sorrowful that life can be.

"I shall pray that his kind soul obtains Misorua's blessings."

".....Thank you very much."

The margrave quietly raised his glass. For a moment, without saying anything, he merely prayed for the well-being of my former personal attendant's soul.



On my way back in the horse-drawn carriage, I merely looked out the window without saying anything. In my hands were some sweets wrapped up in decorative paper. Margrave Molton had given them to me as a present.

".....Are secret messages and codes typical for nobles, I wonder?"

“Are they?”

“No..... it’s nothing.”

I couldn’t help but ask Claudia a question, but only got a blank look in response, which made me realize that it was useless to ask her, so I fell silent.

The sweets were wrapped up in several layers of paper, and on the inside of the outermost layer, there was a message from Margrave Molton.

It’s a custom to not tear up beautiful wrapping paper, so that it can be used again at a later date as a letter or message card. I would have noticed it sooner or later, but because I have a habit of sending a thank you message to people for inviting me, I found it immediately.

The message was about people passing through Margrave Molton’s domain to go visit the northern domains. Some traveling church sisters were being strangely active, and were involving themselves with the northern nobles. Why did Margrave Molton tell me this, I wonder. Exactly what are these church sisters up to.

Since I had very little information to go off of, it’s a bit frustrating. I sighed and looked outside the window at the scenery again. Claudia sitting across from me was in such an excellent mood from having gotten to eat all sorts of sweets at Margrave Molton’s party, that she started humming.

CHAPTER 77

NEW THINGS

The next day, early in the morning, I was already riding my horse.

I'm riding east on a road leading out of the royal capital. Riding next to me was Paulo, as well as Ratoka who was dressed in girl's clothing and wearing a veil, while behind me were Claudia and Bellway, sharing a horse together.

Last night, Paulo had rode a messenger horse to inform me about a bandit group's invasion from the neighboring country.

They had been hiding themselves around the outskirts of the Monster Forest in the Jugfena domain, and they seem to have often invaded Margrave Genas's domain, but there weren't enough troops to guard the border against them.

Under a pincer attack from the troops of both the Jugfena and Genas domains, the only place they could escape to geographically, was unfortunately the Kaldia domain.

Thanks to Ergnade informing me of his plans beforehand, my troops were already spread out throughout Kaldia, and volunteers from the Shiru tribe were also on the lookout against the bandits as well. It'll be good if we can capture them before any citizens are harmed.....

I canceled the church activity that I was supposed to attend. The head priest was supposed to come as well, and I had really wanted to build some direct connections within the church, but there's no helping it given the current circumstances. Hopefully I can make up for it if I return.

Even so, I won't be able to return to the royal capital for quite some time. Also, Earl Terejia has been feeling rather under the weather with his body in bad condition lately.

At this time of year, many nobles gather in the royal capital. Marquis Nordstrom's retinue is also here currently. During this time that I'm away from the capital, I don't know what they're going to say about me.

It'll probably be something disadvantageous to me that can't be confirmed immediately by third parties, though.



We passed by my original mansion, finally reaching the central portion of my domain deep into the night, where a new domain lord's residence had been constructed. The supplies for constructing this new residence had mostly come from the surrounding mountains, as the Amon Nor mountains were directly east of here, and there was a river flowing down from them that provided water as well.

This river, the Sera River, runs parallel to a river that's on our western border, the Rukter River. Upstream from here is Cyril village. Also, on the eastern side of the Sera River, is a flat region filled with lakes and plains.

"You've arrived, my lord."

Just as I jumped off my horse, I heard the Artolan language from behind me. When I looked back, I saw a young man from the Shiru tribe running towards me, wearing a tunic with their unique designs.

"Ahh, I just got back. How are things in Kaldia, Teo?"

Teo – this young man named Teomer, was the person directly chosen by the Shiru tribe to be their representative in all things related to me. He also happens to be the leader of their young warriors, so of course, I've talked to him the most out of anyone from their tribe.

"Right now my forces are searching east of the Sera River for the bandits. I don't believe they've crossed west of the river yet. The guys from the army are guarding the villages and the river. Those were Gunther's orders."

"I see.It's easier to track them in the plains. But since we can't find them, they might have left our domain already. Maybe just like when the Jugfena soldiers were chasing them, they crossed over into the Genas domain again.If only we could get into contact with the Genas domain's army....."

I happened to glance at Bellway as I said that, but he shook his head.

“I sent a messenger pigeon out, but..... The reply I got from Margrave Genas’s wife was that ‘each domain should take care of its own problems.’”

Teo and I nodded without surprise at this. It’s very well known that Margrave Genas’s wife runs most of the internal affairs in the Genas domain, and that she hates Kaldia. Due to my late father’s insane hobbies, and the fact that I’ve inherited his looks and that the Kaldias have received the nickname of “the demon family,” Margrave Genas’s wife doesn’t hide her distaste for us at all. Her disgust at how the biggest victims of my parents’ insanity were Kaldia’s own citizens probably led to her attitude towards the entire Kaldia domain. Although I don’t know the details, there’s also rumors that her father and my grandfather had been archenemies as well.

“Teo, do you still have warriors available to move out right away at this moment?”

“.....Ahh, half of them are still here, helping with the village’s construction.”

“Construction can wait until later. Summon all the remaining warriors here.”

Teo didn’t nod at me in acknowledgement. He stepped up to me, kneeled, and grabbed my shoulder. He probably didn’t hold back his strength at all, I could hear some grinding sounds coming from my tiny shoulder.

I gritted my teeth and bore the pain. I didn’t even allow my cheek muscles to twitch in the slightest. I met Teo’s sharp gaze directly as he spoke.

“I can’t agree to having the construction of our living quarters be delayed. Or are you saying, that the original citizens of your domain are more important than us, the newcomers? You’re the one who told us originally that you would treat us the same.”

Construction had already fallen far behind schedule. The original leader of the project, Kamil, has died. The refugee farmers that would have been numbers to help the construction have also been slaughtered, and the new construction overseer, me, had been out for some time. They’re using construction materials that they’re not used to, and getting used to living in an entirely new environment.

To him, finishing the construction for his tribe is critically important. I also knew beforehand how passionate he was about this.

Teomer is one of the leaders of the Shiru tribe. During his tribe’s long escape from the Densel army, several of their leaders perished, so he had been chosen as one of their

new leaders. Among his tribe's eight leaders, he's the only young one, but his age didn't matter. Young and old, everyone in the Shiru tribe respected him, and pinned their hopes on him.

I put my own tiny hand on top of Teo's hand on my shoulder.

"Teomer Terit, I'm also troubled by the fact that the construction of your tribe's living quarters isn't complete yet.But, I wasn't in the royal capital to play around. It'll be no problem to stop the construction temporarily."

Teo blinked slowly. In his stone grey eyes, a flame seemed to be flickering.

".....You have some sort of measures in place?"

"I had a discussion with Lord Carson about hiring some carpenters. Next month, sixty carpenters will be arriving here, bringing their entire workshop. From furniture to more difficult things such as boats and bridges, they'll be building those for us. They're currently working on processing the wood to be used. I also asked them to prepare some spinning wheels and weaving machines."

Indeed, I didn't have the luxury of playing around in the royal capital at all. I don't have the free time, or the right, to do such a thing. I continued speaking.

"I know. I presumptuously said that I'd accept your tribe, but my original citizens have negative feelings towards me. Even so, I have the duty to protect everyone, which is why I have to make use of your warriors.I may not be able to live the lifestyle of a warrior, but this is something I simply have to do out of my own pride."

Teo's hand on my shoulder completely loosened its grip. He looked straight into my eyes that were the color of blood. A blaze burned brightly in his eyes, feeling similar to when Earl Terejia was looking straight at me as if he could see through me. He could see himself reflected in my eyes.

Under the urging of Claudia behind me, he finally got up. Then, he bowed deeply towards me.

".....I apologize for my rudeness. As my lord has commanded, I'll summon all of the warriors in the village here. Let's search westward."

"That'll be helpful.Thank you."

CHAPTER 78

SEARCH

The torchlight was flickering on this dark, moonless night. This year as well, there were a few phosphorescent moths flying about. From the tiny hill, their light was all I could see that was moving.

Teo had gathered the warriors, and we've already been searching for the bandits for half an hour. I borrowed a tent, and Ratoka went to sleep first in it. I'm getting sleepy as well, but since I'm still waiting on a report, I stood waiting outside the tent.

Suddenly, I heard a loud flapping sound from above me, and I lifted my head to look at the sky. It seems that Rashiok detected my return somehow, it was his wings causing the commotion. The huge draconis now currently hovering in front of me, had already grown to be as big as a horse. He's still far from reaching maturity, but his body's already grown.

Rashiok slowly lowered that beautiful body of his in front of me. He greeted me with a growl that meant he wanted to be spoiled, he must have not wanted to be left behind at my original mansion while I'm doing all these things here.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Rashiok. I guess I didn't promise a time I would be back by."

His ears bent back just like a dog's would. As I carefully petted him so that I wouldn't accidentally scrape off any of his scales, he closed his eyes and seemed to enjoy it.

"It seems that a bandit group from the Densel Dukedom has invaded us.It seems that our neighbors just won't give us a break. If only they would take Earl Terejia's age into consideration and let him rest."

Although I was using sarcasm, just like a human would respond, Rashiok snorted at my comment.

Bandit groups. I slowly took over my time to think about them. They seem to be common in this world, and just a few years ago, they used to be a problem here in Kaldia as well. Well, most of them were pacified after my father died, with them

becoming soldiers in the Kaldia army. Earl Terejia's viewpoint was that they were more victims than aggressors due to my father's despotic policies, and emphasized allowing them to make up for their crimes by joining the military. Some people still remain unaccounted for, but for now, there's no major bandit problems in the kingdom of Arxia.

Most bandits, only turned to banditry because they had no other way of making a living. Most of them were originally farmers, and it was hunger and poverty that forced them into banditry. With the way that Kaldia had been, where people didn't have money, food, or even clothes at times since my father had taken everything from his citizens, it was only natural that bandits would appear.

This time though, a bandit group has taken the trouble of crossing the border between countries to invade us. What's more, the public peace and order is usually much better in Arxia than it is in Densel. At first, I thought that the bandits were invading for some strategic purpose, but it seems that they've only been pillaging and plundering.

If they have some sort of purpose in mind, I wouldn't know. It would be nice if I could come up with some clever method to capture them.

– Some of the tools in the deepest part of my mansion's dungeon, I wonder if I should make use of them.

I kept thinking about such matters while paying no attention to the flickering torchlight in front of me. A bandit group has invaded us from the neighboring country which we have bad relations with. The bandits passed through Jugfena without suffering any damage. I asked for cooperation from Genas, but was rejected. If I can just catch them, any information leaked about them as well as how I deal with them will be completely up to the discretion of Earl Terejia and I.

In other words, trying to get information out of them is also the capturer's job. For the second time, I thought about the tools I had placed into the deepest part of the dungeon, a relic of my father's twisted hobbies, but unfortunately it looks probable that I might be the very one to bring them out again. I can't exactly sell them, and I had kept them thinking that maybe I would have them melted down and made into weapons as they were made of iron.

The memories of how to use them are still vividly etched into my mind, forced upon me as I was already self-aware with my reincarnated memories when I was one year old, without the ability yet to fully control my body.

I also gained the knowledge of how to toy with people's lives and spirits. No matter how disgusting I find it, I was born into the Kaldia family after all.

Rashiok's ears suddenly jumped up from their flattened state while I was stroking him, and he started watching the path to the hilltop I was on. After a little while, I saw some people riding up the hill on horseback. The person leading them was Gunther.

"My lord!"

Gunther and his subordinates got off their horses as they approached me, and kneeled. He chuckled a little at seeing Rashiok by my side, but his expression immediately got serious as he said "reporting in."

"Gunther, what information do you have?"

"The Shiru warriors that were searching along the borders found evidence of track marks along our Genas border, from when the bandits crossed over. The closest places to where they entered are Charon village and Nezu village, and there's a report from Nezu village that two girls living together there have been missing since earlier today."

As expected, the bandit group has invaded us, making use of the border with Genas repeatedly. If they cross the border, my troops won't be allowed to chase them. How impudent, they're making use of our internal political conflicts to their advantage.

"Search for them. Have our most skilled trackers follow the trail for as far as possible. Take Rashiok along with you. Claudia and I shall go to Nezu village. Our first priority should be the safety of the missing two girls."

"Understood. I'll leave three soldiers here to help protect you."

Without waiting for anything else, Gunther jumped onto his horse and rode off. I had already finished giving my orders, so I didn't mind. The sound of his horse's hooves soon faded. After I rubbed his head a bit, Rashiok took off into the night as well almost silently.

I had the three soldiers that Gunther left me ride by Claudia, and I got on my horse as well. I'll just leave Ratoka here. I'm going to narrow the search area to the southeast part of my domain, and I also ordered all the Shiru warriors searching nearby to join me, as I headed for Nezu village.

Being nomads, the Shiru warriors are extremely skilled trackers. When hunting, it's said that no prey can escape them once they've caught up. It all depends on luck now if they're still currently here in Kaldia or if they've crossed back over to Genas. I'm going to have to leave the fate of my two missing citizens, well, up to fate.

CHAPTER 79

IS ANGER SUPPOSED TO BE COLD?

Now that I've reached Nezu village, I can finally rest a little. Although personally I would prefer to not go to sleep yet as my mind is still sharp, my young body is telling me that it's tired. It's getting late in the night as well, so it'll be difficult to fight off the desire to sleep. I borrowed a room in one of the mayor's houses, as he also happened to be the biggest landlord in Nezu village. I fell asleep almost instantly upon reaching my bed, but I woke up quickly the next morning as well, getting up together with dawn.

I changed out of my clothes that I hadn't bothered getting out of last night, and wiped myself with a wet towel from a bucket provided for me last night. I used a cheap cotton cloth to clean my teeth.

When I finished and walked out of my room, Claudia was sitting there waiting for me, and she greeted me.

"Did you manage to get some rest, Ellusia-dono?"

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono. Good morning. I'm feeling fine, strangely not tired at all."

"That's good to hear, Eliza-dono."

Claudia, who had spent the entire night guarding my room, sounded a little less energetic compared to normal. She hasn't been resting enough ever since we left the royal capital as she's been entirely focused on being my personal bodyguard. I'm really going to have to make her rest a lot after this commotion is over and taken care of. – In the first place, it's a bit too much to ask her to be my only bodyguard. It was a bit easier when I was back at the mansion, but now that I'm currently out on the move, there's a lot more things to deal with.

When I went downstairs, the mayor's wife had already prepared breakfast for me. When everyone saw me, a small sound of lamentation broke the silence in the hall.

"Stop that."

In front of something she didn't want to see, the mayor's wife put a quick stop to the lamenting. The mayor's wife was a woman of more than 30 years old, but she wouldn't even look directly at me. I properly thanked the mayor's wife for hosting and feeding me, but she pitifully just kept trembling. Although she seemed like she was running as if to escape from me, I followed after her to the dining hall where breakfast had been prepared for me. There was no poison or anything unusual, just rye bread commonly found anywhere and egg soup, as well as some sausages. Since sausages are preserved food and the cattle industry hasn't quite recovered yet in Kaldia, this is actually quite luxurious and they're taking rather good care of me.

I don't know whether to feel happy or pained. But in any case, if they treat me well, I'll treat them kindly in turn.

"You seem – to be quite calm."

"Hah?"

"No, Ena-dono..... Whoops, I mean, Eliza-dono, I can see for myself that you always worry yourself over your citizens."

Ahh, how rare, Claudia noticed mid-sentence that she said my name wrong and corrected herself. Meaning, she thinks that I should be more worried, and more angry.

Indeed, that would be normal. I believe that as well.

I'm calmer than she believed I should be, due to the fact that all the Shiru warriors are on the move. My army and the Shiru warriors, will definitely catch the bandits and bring them before me. That's what I believe – or in other words, I trust them. I have to.

"I believe Gunther and Teo will live up to my expectations."

At my reply, Claudia blinked, then she smiled.



When I left the mayor's house, waiting for me outside were Paulo and the three soldiers that Gunther left in charge of my protection yesterday.

"Good morning, my lord."

“Morning. Anything to report?”

“Rashiok’s discovered their tracks. He’s currently following them.”

Paulo answered with a lively voice. He had only been a novice soldier in training just last year, but it feels like all the soldiers that returned from Fort Jugfena have really matured. Speaking of maturing, Rashiok is now the size of a horse, it’s getting difficult for me who’s still quite short to get on his back. Being the intelligent draconis he is, he’s using his other abilities to assist me.

.....I stopped myself from getting lost in my thoughts and asked Paulo, “anything else?” He seemed to hesitate a little, before opening his mouth again.

“Also..... we discovered what we believe to be hair strands from the missing women.”

Women’s hair strands, eh. It seems that it was discovered on the side of the road. The rest can be left up to the imagination, the unfortunate plight of the women taken by the bandits. Since we’ve discovered their hair strands while tracking the bandits, it can mostly be confirmed that they’re responsible for kidnapping the women.

It feels like I’m starting to see red.

Last night I still had some doubts about what might have happened, but now it feels like some sort of anger is starting to flow up within me. It’s not irritation or rage, it feels like I’m boiling inside, but I don’t know what word to express it as other than anger.

“Eliza-dono, your eyes are getting really scary.”

At Claudia’s comment, I noticed that Paulo seemed to be getting really scared of me. I wonder just how frightening my face had been. I’m still only seven years old on the outside, I didn’t think I’d be able to leave that much of an impression. I rubbed my eyes, and Paulo appeared slightly relieved.

“Got it, tell everyone that they’re to pick up the pace and keep tracking the bandits.”

“Yes!”

Paulo replied energetically and I saw him off, then I turned to Claudia.

I took out some paper and charcoal wrapped in a bundle from the pouch under my belt, and began writing a simple letter.

“Claudia-dono, I’m relieving you temporarily from your duties as my bodyguard. I want you to take Elise (Ratoka) from Sera River back to my mansion, the Mansion of Golden Hills. Give this letter to him.”

Claudia’s eyes were following the charcoal as I finished writing my simple letter, with her lips moving as she read what I was writing. The memo to Ratoka simply asked him to bring out the whip from the deepest part of the dungeon and bring it to me, as well as making sure the real noble girl Elise didn’t find out about this. That whip has drank the blood of many people, it’s not something that a sickly girl recovering from an illness should be witnessing.

“In order for it to be not said that I’m the incarnation of my father, I’m going to have to consider how to use it.”

“I know you’re not like him.”

“Then, it’s fine.”

Claudia nodded slightly, gave some orders to the three soldiers remaining for my protection, then headed for the stables to get her horse.

I was still seeing red in my vision, and boiling inside. Even so, my head still mysteriously somehow remained as cool as ice. It was as if I managed to remain frozen solid within boiling water.

That’s why, I’m going to wait here. I’m going to wait for my soldiers, my citizens, my draconis to drag those bastards in front of me.

CHAPTER 80

PROTECTION

Two young women that didn't seem twenty years old yet, were dragged in front of me while frantically crying and screaming by my soldiers, they weren't able to say anything comprehensible.

"Thanks for your work, sorry but, could you guys get out of this room now?"

I realize very well that my voice sounds quite raspy. The soldiers saluted me, then dashed out of the room like they were escaping from me.

I suppose I had indeed only given my soldiers the order to bring the rescued women before me without going into much detail, so this situation can't be helped. The women had been discovered together with the bandit scum that my soldiers recently captured, with plenty of signs of abuse. It would only be natural that they'd be scared of my soldiers and other such men as well right now, increasing their fear. I complimented myself on having the young women from the village prepare something beforehand a few hours ago. I had asked them to prepare a bucket of hot water to wash with and some clean cloths.

"Go ahead and wipe down your bodies. After that, have a meal. It's simple, but feel free to eat as much as you like."

"Yes, domain lord-sama."

The village girl who seemed to have a stronger will looked me in the eyes as she replied. The other girl just nodded her head in fright.

Earlier today around noon, the bandit group had been discovered in a small cottage quite a ways north from Nezu village. Although the summer days are long, it's already getting late as it's dinnertime now.

The mayor's wife had food prepared for us. When we learned about the discovery and capture of the bandit group half an hour ago, we hurriedly contacted the Mansion of Golden Hills and had fruits, vegetables, and bread from there brought over. Ratoka, Claudia, and the three soldiers protecting me took turns in bringing foodstuffs over

from the mansion, but Ratoka wasn't able to hide his dislike of having to make the trip between the mansion and Nezu village twice. Even with a veil, his distaste was plain to see.

".....Don't pout like that. I'll even praise you."

As I said so, I gave that awkward child three fruits known as a rockfruit. This fruit is similar to loquats from my original world. In Kaldia where no edible fruits or berries grow naturally, fruits are considered a luxury. Of course, I didn't buy these, they were given to me recently as a gift when I was making social connections in the royal capital.

"Is this really fine?"

"I told you that I would praise you, didn't I? Besides, it looked like you really wanted to try these in the royal capital."

As my servant in training, Ratoka got to attend several parties and banquets together with me, but servants were only allowed to drink some water and tea, and were not permitted to touch the food for nobles. I know that this child has always had his sight fixed on this sweet-seeming fruit.

And so, Ratoka finally seemed to cheer up from his bad mood as he began eating, and I turned my sight back upon the two girls that were still weeping.

Both of them seemed to evoke a feeling of pity that would make one want to protect them. Although it was easy to infer from the fact that my army found several strands of their hair, parts of their hair was pulled out here and there. It was also easy to tell that they were subjected to violence, as there were multiple black and blue bruises on their bodies. There appeared to be sword injuries and even teeth marks on their arms and legs. Their clothes were tattered, torn almost completely to pieces around the breast area, and their skirts were quite torn up as well. While cleaning themselves up, it only made the injuries and damage even more painfully obvious to see. I think it'll be the best for them if I help them get some new loose-fitting tunics, clothes typical to Kaldia citizens. If they wear something tight with buttons or a corset like what's popular further inland in Arxia, I think that the clothes would only scrape against their injuries and constantly remind them of the pain. Since they're now in front of their domain lord, I'll help them regain their senses, and I shared the food transported here with them.

"Please eat. You'll feel warmer after a meal."

Helping them to clean their bodies, allowing them to eat their fill, having only women around them, that should help the two victimized women calm down. Their trembling finally eased as they looked around the room and saw that the only strangers were me and Ratoka, whom they believed to be a girl. At what I was about to do from now on, I started feeling a little melancholy. I need to ask them why the bandits had abducted them. I feel sorry for them that I'm going to be digging up their memories of the things that were probably done to them right after they've calmed down a little, but it's my duty to do so.

".....Have you two calmed down a little?"

I can't really do much else for the two of them emotionally, I merely stayed here in the same room as them all this time to get them used to my presence. I have a slight feeling of self-loathing right now, but I also simultaneously took out some charcoal and paper.

The two of them nodded nervously. They seemed like they were about to speak to me, but their mothers next to them shot me looks of disapproval. However, I ignored it and carried on.

"What violence those people did to you, anything they said to you, please try to remember it all as clearly as possible."

I didn't ask them if it would be alright to ask. This is information that I need to hear immediately.

The two young women instantly turned pale. It looked like they were trying their best to restrain themselves from crying again, as they relived their hellish memories.

At that moment, the charcoal in my hand broke.

I didn't realize it until now, but it seems that I had been clenching it too tightly. As I took out a new piece of charcoal, I kept telling myself to calm down over and over.

CHAPTER 81

INTERROGATION TIME, PART 1

As for what I had done to the captured bandits, I had them gagged by stuffing cloths into their mouths, preventing them from biting their tongues to commit suicide, stripped naked to ensure that there were no hidden weapons on them, and also had their hands bound behind their backs and then threw them into that dark dungeon below my mansion.

It's quite damp down there, it's dark and cold with no sunlight whatsoever, it's definitely a place that puts great stress on the human spirit.

When Ratoka was younger, he had spent three days down there, and he had emerged from it seeming quite haggard. Although he did recover his energy after just a few days.

.....Come to think of it, Ratoka retrieved the whip for me from the dungeon with no problems. Although there are a few lights down there, for him to have slept just like normal in the dungeon, that child might actually be more bold than I thought.

The only thing I gave the bandits was one very large barrel of water, then I left them alone in the dungeon for two days. This way, they have to go to the bathroom right there, they're starving, and they can't even drink properly through the cloths in their mouths. It's a method to increase the speed at which their spirits will break down.

On the morning of the third day, I brought a bandit who seemed like he might be one of their leaders out of the dungeon. The bandit probably wasn't able to sleep properly, he looked haggard and pale as he stood in the interrogation room of the barracks. Since I haven't given him anything to eat for two days, he's probably feeling dizzy and nauseous as well.

"I'll ask you this first. You have anything you want to say?"

He had been roughly washed by my soldiers, and was allowed to wear his original clothes again that have been inspected already, but his hair and beard were still filthy and unkempt.

“.....I have a very good understanding now of how you barbaric and savage Arxian nobles treat their prisoners. It’s been quite a valuable experience.”

He’s got quite the iron will. He’s perceptive as well.

He went to the trouble of talking to me in the Arxian language, he didn’t look down on me for being a child, and he even noted that I was “Arxian nobility” on our first meeting.

“This dungeon was left behind by my late father, known for being the most cruel tyrant in all of Arxia. I couldn’t think of any place more appropriate for the cultured visitors from another country to relax and rest. I’m sure that you’re used to soft beds?”

I smiled at the irony. Although barbaric and savage are meant by him as insults to me, I don’t think of it as such. I don’t think anyone from Kaldia would think that to be much of an insult either.

The soldiers that were guarding the bandit all laughed in unison. Since they’re used to vulgar speech every day, they’re much more skilled at ways to insult people. In order to break the prisoners completely, I had to ban several behaviors, and I thought about stopping them, but it seems I was correct not to. The bandit’s face started turning slightly red at seeing everyone laugh at him.

“Oh? So even you guys have soft beds? Let me guess, the Arxian nobles and the commoners alike, you all sleep on stacks of straw?”

“Oh, so people in Densel must still sleep on stacks of straw. It seems that your culture must still be quite backwards, that must be really inconvenient. It was the right thing to do to have you guys sleep in the dungeon. After all, even the plain beds that commoners sleep in, are too good for you.”

At seeing my snickering, and being lost for words to counter me, the bandit could only curse me out in his native Ringwren language, “damned brat.”

My soldiers weren’t able to contain their laughter. Is it really that funny, I wonder. While I did order them to be “crass and vulgar” towards the prisoners, and they’ve followed my orders obediently..... Although I think they would have done so without orders anyways.

Well then, just with this trading of insults alone, I've found out quite a bit about this bandit.

Since I had quite a lot of knowledge about various languages forced into me by Mrs. Marshan, I was able to know that the bandit was cursing me in the Ringwren language. Although he has quite an accent, he's also able to speak Arxian – this means that he's had quite the social upbringing. The Ringwren language is what's spoken in Densel and Planates. Despite the fact that he was cursing me, his pronunciation was very smooth, he's definitely someone from the upper class of society.

And no matter what, he's not saying words I'd expect a bandit to say. However, the information I received from Jugfena was that "a bandit group has invaded our country." On what basis did Jugfena call this group a "bandit group," I need to confirm it.

Well, I'll organize the current information I have for now, and it's about time to start the real interrogation, so I called out to Ratoka who was in the next room. Ratoka is wearing a veil today as well so that the soldiers don't recognize him, but he probably has quite a distorted facial expression under that veil right now.

"Bring that item I had you prepare for me here."

"Yes."

Ratoka approached me, and uncoiled the whip in his hand for me. This whip has many chains and knots to it like a flail, and the knots seem specially designed to cause people to bleed more. I remember that my father gave this whip to my former older brother as a gift on his sixth birthday. I suppose that if my father were still alive, he'd be giving me things like these as gifts too.

Meanwhile, the bandit was looking at the whip with wide eyes of surprise. For the first time since entering this room, I saw his face twitch a little.

"I'm going to ask you some more questions now. I don't mind if you answer them or not, but..... Well, there's still eleven more people in the dungeon that can take your place. But, I'm not going to go get any of them until I'm finished with your interrogation."

At hearing so, the bandit's face started twitching more violently.

“If it gets to the last person, I wonder if he’ll be almost dead of hunger.”

My soldiers kept laughing crassly. I guess it was an effective follow-up blow, the bandit’s face turned completely pale. I see, is there someone he really cares about in there, or someone really important that he can’t allow to die in there, I wonder.

“You..... You wicked heretic!”

He started shouting at me in great anger.

I see, so I’m a heretic. Well then, I absolutely have to hear more about this.

It’s easier than I thought to get information from him, and I began to slightly feel like I may be enjoying this.

CHAPTER 82

INTERROGATION TIME, PART 2

“Alright, the first question may seem silly, but why did you guys come to Arxia?”

The bandit glared at me without saying anything. Well, I’m not going to waste words, I ordered the soldiers to force him to kneel, and began whipping him.

Sounds of pain began echoing throughout the interrogation room. Since his clothes are still on, that should mitigate some of the damage. Taking that into consideration, I whipped him another five times.

He was gritting his teeth to deal with the pain, and wouldn’t even moan. As I expected, he’s not a simple bandit. There’s no way that a normal bandit who only invaded Arxia to pillage and steal should have a strong enough will to withstand torture.

“Let me ask a different question. Where were you headed in Arxia?”

“.....I’m not familiar with Arxian geography.”

I suppose he learned that he’ll suffer again if he keeps remaining silent, so he spat that out at me. I’m not impressed by his lie. I whipped him again.

Dark red spots began appearing on his linen shirt. They were shaped like earthworms, marks left by the whip. It seems that his skin is beginning to tear.

They’re able to skillfully make use of our internal borders, and escape from the Jugfena cavalry platoons, what a joke, saying he doesn’t know Arxian geography.

I switched the whip to my left hand, and continued whipping him with all my strength. The whip made a sharp cracking sound in the air with each swing that mingled with the dull thuds of it striking flesh. The metal chains on it kept causing injuries instantly, staining his shirt red wherever it landed.

He finally managed to moan something out. I saw several of my soldiers grimacing.

“Urgh, n, no..... North..... We were going north!”

“North?”

“Y, yes. Since the southern and eastern domains in Arxia are along the border and on guard against other countries, and have stronger standing armies, we were going north.....”

Whatever his reason, it's true that they were heading north. The Amon Nor mountains run all the way through the northern and eastern parts of Kaldia and Jugfena. Even in summer, it's very difficult to traverse through that mountain range. As for the bandits' tracks, ever since the last time they escaped from the Genas domain, they've been heading directly north and have been avoiding villages. They crossed into the central portion of Kaldia from Genas, which happens to be close to the Amon Nor mountains. It's true that they were taking the shortest distance north.

– They sure do have a good understanding of Arxian geography, don't they.

I begun whipping his legs rather than his back. His back seems quite swollen already. Pain from being whipped is different from other types of pain like being burned, the pain won't fade easily, it will continue to hurt. People are quite weak to pain.

“Urgh..... Gah.....!”

It must be humiliating for him to be tortured by a child. Every time I swung down the whip against his legs, he groaned.

“Why did you abduct those women?”

“To find..... the exact locations of the villages.....”

“If that was all, you guys went quite overboard.”

They definitely didn't need to do what they did to those women if it was only to find out the locations of the villages.

“.....Some of the younger ones, they wanted to use them as sex slaves and have some fun..... Agh-!!!”

My whip just happened to connect against his heel just then. It seems that it managed to tear off some flesh, he raised his voice in agony. Maybe he experienced too much

pain all at once, he ended up fainting. Pain aside, this is to be expected. I did have him starved for two days to aid in breaking down his spirit after all.

“Bring me some wine.”

I pointed to a random soldier and had him bring me some of the cheap, low-grade bottles of wine that I had prepared beforehand on a table alongside the wall to this room. There was a strange and heavy atmosphere in the room now after seeing my interrogation. The soldier gingerly handed me a bottle of wine with jerky motions.

I poured the wine onto the bandit’s back. The alcohol began soaking into his blood. The man screamed as he woke up again.

“The interrogation isn’t over yet. Before it ends, you’re not allowed to rest.”

When a person’s mind is in a haze, it makes it difficult to think clearly or come up with lies. Meaning, people under great duress are more likely to tell the truth once they can’t think straight anymore due to the pain.

I swung my whip again, and his screams continued.



It took four days for me to finish interrogating all the bandits. In order for them to not die before giving me all their precious information, I fed them just a little, but of course since I didn’t give them enough, they were tortured all the more by pangs of hunger.

By the time I got through half of them, I was swinging my whip noticeably less times, it seems that I was using some muscles I don’t normally use very much, I definitely felt some dull muscle pain from my arms.

Knowledge gained from my father on torture methods proved quite helpful, and I was able to draw out a lot of information from the bandits. Although I might learn more if I interrogate them more in a second session, for now I’ll just write down what I learned and send a report to Earl Terejia.

– As expected, they weren’t simply a group of bandits. Several of them seem to be highly educated. While Densel is indeed culturally behind Arxia, I can’t imagine that it’s so bad to where their nobles would stoop to being bandits. Meaning, there’s Densel nobility behind these bandits, or maybe something even higher. Taking into

consideration that the first bandit I interrogated called me a “heretic,” there might be some sort of religious entity involved as well.

The religion that Densel believes in has a god named Revua at the top, with various lesser gods below Revua. So compared to the Ar Xia church in Arxia, they’re called the Revua church. I concluded that the first bandit may be a believer of the Revua church..... And thinking along those lines, isn’t there also quite a good chance that they may have disguised themselves as bandits and invaded Arxia for some religious purpose?

Also, I confirmed that their goal was to head “north.” I had already sent out warnings several days ago to various northern nobles about possible danger, even to the Nordsturms that I don’t get along with. Even though they’re opposing the decision of the Hall of Lords, and view me as an eyesore to be dealt with – the Nordsturms are an important noble family, that’s an unavoidable fact, and I’m sure even Earl Terejia would agree with me that I should send them a warning.

Well, I’m only extending them that courtesy assuming that they will at least band together internally against external enemies. It’s a different story if the Nordsturms have some sort of dealings with foreign organizations.

I have no evidence. But, I need to be vigilant.

I finished my report, locked the drawer to my desk, and stretched my back. I winced slightly at my own muscle pain.

CHAPTER 83

CHATTING WITH RATOKA

It happened right after I finished my second round of interrogations. A messenger pigeon came to us from the House of Lords in the royal capital. The message stated that the bandit group that successfully invaded Arxia have been declared national enemies to be on guard against, and that they were to be taken into custody by the royal army under direct command of the king.

“It’s fortunate that there’s still more than ten days before I have to take them to the royal army.”

“You do realize that they’re going to be taken into custody by the country?”

Ratoka was reacting to the news in the letter. I had just commented on it, and he was asking me why I thought it was lucky. I nodded, and began my explanation. Although I have a ton of work, it’s summer, and the cloying heat is a distraction. I felt like a little change of pace by chatting with Ratoka.

“Although they were captured in the end, they still managed to penetrate through our border domains and even reach further inland. That’s something that hasn’t happened since the great war in which the Artolas Kingdom was destroyed. Our defenses aren’t that light. At the very least, a simple ‘bandit group’ shouldn’t be able to penetrate so far inland.”

“.....But, they did get that far.”

I emphasized that they weren’t a simple bandit group, and Ratoka lowered his eyes to look at the floor. It seems that he’s trying to organize the information he knows already with the hint I just gave him, despite his young age, he’s got quite a good brain that works fast. I have the habit of looking down whenever I’m thinking. It seems that he’s copied my habit.

“Mrs. Marshan taught me that information about Arxian internal affairs isn’t very well known outside our country, especially to a hostile country we don’t have a friendly relationship with like Densel.”

“That’s correct.”

“Commoners would have even less access to information about Arxia. The only place in Densel where they would even see Arxians is in the palace at their capital, where Arxian diplomats stay..... For that bandit group to know our borders in such detail, they may have a connection with the Densel palace. Come to think of it, some of them knew how to speak Arxian. Is there a noble mixed in amongst them.....”

I nodded at each of his analyses of the information so far, when I suddenly realized that my lips were beginning to shape themselves into the form of a smile. The way this child thinks, while he did receive the same education as I did, he’s really so similar to me. Sharing information with him is a good way to confirm my own theories, it seems quite effective so far as Ratoka’s inferences overlap with mine, this is good. Now that I’ve noticed how smart he is, I’m going to make even more use of him in the future.

“Of course the House of Lords doesn’t know that these bandits are highly educated yet, those nobles are probably of course more concerned with the path the bandits took as they invaded us, feeling suspicious about it. They want to be on guard against the neighboring country, and not let any future invaders get anywhere close to them.”

“Yes, sooner or later our country would learn about us capturing the bandits. That’s why I spent so much energy interrogating the bandits so much.”

Before they were taken away from me, to where I wouldn’t be able to reach them anymore, I wanted to squeeze as much information as possible out of them first. Ratoka nodded, saying “I see.”

I fell silent, and pointed to the bottle of water on the desk. I’d gotten thirsty after all this chatting. Maybe an attitude of serving has been ingrained into him, Ratoka poured a glass of water for me almost unconsciously. This apple mint water has a distinctive cool, refreshing feeling, it completely wiped away the feeling of summer for me. I felt recharged instantly, and continued chatting.

“I suspect that there may be conspirators within our country aiding them. They knew too many details about our internal geography.”

“Conspirators, eh. Indeed, our diplomats should have no reason to teach the enemy about our geography. But, why is it that Arxia is going to all the trouble of taking custody of the bandits and moving them?”

As expected, when it comes to the way that nobles think, Ratoka hasn't learned enough yet and he still can't come up with the reason. He stopped thinking about it, and asked me directly and politely.

"If they're in a dungeon in the royal capital, the nobles can easily go see the prisoners. Since nobles are used to having people at their beck and call, of course they'd want the prisoners within their reach. What's more, if the Nordsturms are involved like I'm worried about, it'll be the most inconvenient for them more than anyone if the bandits remain here as our prisoners."

"But, isn't it dangerous to just obediently hand the prisoners over then?"

"Who said we're just going to obediently hand them over?"

Eh, Ratoka froze for a moment. Then, he hit his hand with his fist after two deep breaths. He has a look of absolute disgust.

"I see. You're going to 'kill' some people, just like you did to me."

"You should be watching your vocabulary and acting more feminine, 'Elise.'"

As I thought, he really thinks in a similar fashion to me. Yes, even if it's an order from the House of Lords, I see no reason to give them all of the bandits. After all, I had the full authority to question them until this letter arrived. Meaning, even if I accidentally killed one or two bandits during the interrogation process, that was a possibility.

"I've already decided who I'm going to have 'killed.' The first bandit I interrogated, and one other, that blonde-haired man.I have to take the rest of the bandits to the royal capital like they want. I'll leave the preparations to you, Elise."

I ended my chat with Ratoka there. Although I returned to my domain because of the bandit invasion, I can't just keep them confined here indefinitely and stay here.

Like I promised Teo, I still need to finish the dealings with other nobles about getting tradesmen from their territories to come help in our construction. I had just really wanted to draft up a more organized system of government while I was back here in my domain. There's still several urgent problems I need to resolve about the construction though, so I have to take care of that as well.

It's the first time I've ever had to deal with the paperwork and procedures necessary for accepting so many new citizens, I've been incredibly busy with very little time to rest. As for the management work and rebuilding of my domain, I'm beginning to do more and more of it instead of Earl Terejia.

Honestly, that earl..... He's already so elderly, and thinking about how I was still only seven, I almost wanted to cry a little.

CHAPTER 84

A PROCLAMATION AND CONFUSION

I returned to the royal capital, gave the bandits over to the royal army, and headed for Earl Terejia's villa. I went to hear about what happened in the royal capital while I was away, and to report on what happened in my domain, an exchange of information.

"Oh, you've returned?"

"Yes, Earl."

"There's no mistakes in the report from the two female victims from Nezu village?"

"The injuries on their bodies match what they say. The Shiru tribe members that helped in capturing the bandits can confirm this as well."

It seems that Earl Terejia still isn't feeling well, as the meeting was in his bedroom. Looking at the earl in his sleepwear more closely, I feel like he's gotten a bit more gaunt since the last time I saw him. Even though I have grown a little as well, he used to always seem so big to me, and now looking at him he feels thin and small..... He even seems brittle.

"How is your body....."

"I'm just a little fatigued, it's no problem.As expected, the years are catching up to me."

Normally, the earl and I would just dispense with the pleasantries and get immediately to business and work. For me to be asking how he is, I wonder if it's because I'm seeing how old he is, lying down in bed. – Well, it's mutual, we both talk only about work. I don't know if Earl Terejia sees me as his subordinate or his employer, but either way, asking him about how his body is or if he's working too hard isn't like me at all.

"Is anything going on in the royal capital?"

Well, I'll cut to the chase with the topic of the earl's body, and get to the main topic. Suddenly, the earl's already strict-seeming face crinkled even further. Something major must have happened, my back felt stiff and tense.

"Several days ago, the royally-sponsored religious festival took place."

"I know about that. If it wasn't for the bandit group incident, I was supposed to have attended that originally."

"It's an important social event that you happened to miss. This religious festival is the largest event of the entire season. But back to the point, the king made an announcement during the festival."

It was an unexpected topic, I couldn't help but blink unconsciously. Because the king personally announced it to all his subjects, it must have been something that affects the entire country. Even so, the king shouldn't have the power to decide national politics all by himself.

The king of Arxia has full authority for managing and governing over the country. But, there's a limit to what any one person can do, and the governing system in Arxia is one where the king shares power with his lords. Recently in the House of Lords, there shouldn't have been any topics that would require the king to directly make an announcement to the citizens.

"It's about the princes."

".....Ah, I see. If it's a royal family matter, then the House of Lords would have no say in it."

I finally got what was going on, and responded affirmatively. I'm still learning more about politics related to the church and royal family, so I wasn't able to instantly connect all the dots this time.

Just recently, I had learned from Mrs. Marshan's lectures that there's two areas of politics where the House of Lords has no right to interfere in. One area is diplomacy with foreign countries, and the other is the affairs of the royal family. Diplomacy is the realm of the king, the archduke's family, and the Upper House of Lords, while matters about the royal family themselves are jointly decided by the royal family, the church, and the Upper House of Lords.

“There’s currently several princes in the royal family, but do you know how many are in line for direct succession to the throne?”

“Yes. Queen Dionesia’s son Prince Albert, and Princess Evaris’s son Prince Alfred, just those two, right?”

When I asked if I was right, Earl Terejia nodded in confirmation like he was saying I did a good job at remembering.

“Are you still in the middle of your classes on current issues within the royal family?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“I’ll explain it simply for you, Queen Dionesia is the daughter of the duke of Planates Dukedom, while Princess Evaris is a princess from the Melloart family. Since the Queen and the Princess have roughly equal status within Arxia, it’s difficult to determine which prince shall become the crown prince.”

At the earl’s explanation, I thought back to the last time he taught me about politics. *(TL note: Chapter 74, mentions the Arxian royalty.)* With this much of an explanation, I can see where this is going.

“Then, was the announcement at the religious festival about the selection of a crown prince?”

“Correct. The crown prince was announced to be the second prince, Prince Alfred, son of Princess Evaris.”

“Prince Alfred? Not the first prince, Prince Albert?”

It was different from what I expected, so I asked again to make sure. Earl Terejia nodded, so it seems that I didn’t hear incorrectly. I hurriedly tried to recall as much as I can from what I learned about Arxian politics so far. According to Arxian law, there’s indeed no different in status between a queen and princess. But currently, there does exist a difference in status between queen and princess in reality.

Princess Evaris is from the Melloart family, which is one of two Arxian royal families. Together with the current family on the throne, the Teal family, they’re direct descendants of St. Ahar, and they are treated as the same status as the archduke’s family, without holding any positions other than that of family.

On the other hand, when Queen Dionesia married into Arxia from Planates for a political marriage, she didn't have to relinquish her position in Planates. So she's both a queen of Arxia, as well as the daughter of the duke of Planates.

What's more, there's also the matter of the order the princes were born in. Arxia isn't a kingdom in which the eldest inheriting is absolute, but it's a custom. Since Prince Albert's mother is of such high status, and he's the first prince, he should have been announced as the crown prince.

"Nobody doubted that Prince Albert would become the crown prince. Prince Albert is well known in the royal capital for being intelligent. Nothing's lacking about him for him to not become the crown prince."

".....Then how did this happen?"

"I don't know. Because nobody knows, the royal capital is filled with tension and uncertainty at present."

I see, I nodded, and began mentally organizing information. So the crown prince was decided upon as the second prince instead of the first, and the nobles that had supported the first prince to become king were probably quite shaken.No wait, just this alone shouldn't be such a big incident. Thinking about it some more, I didn't take into consideration the first prince's mother's background just earlier.

"Since we're currently on guard against Rindarl, there's quite a few nobles that feel animosity towards Planates....."

"That's right. Currently, it wouldn't be wise to provoke Planates though."

Anyone should think that. Even if the king didn't take that into consideration, the Upper House of Lords should have thought about it before making a hasty decision on the crown prince.

"Well, it's useless even if we talk about it. All nobles like us can do is watch and see what happens."

Although I'm still confused, what Earl Terejia is saying is correct. There's nothing I can do about things related to what goes on in the royal palace or in the royal family.

“Well then, can you fill me in with more details on what you heard from those bandits?”

There’s more important things to take care of first, like things related to my domain. And so I stopped worrying about the royal succession, as I changed the topic.

CHAPTER 85

DISPUTE AT THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Just as I had heard from Earl Terejia, the announcement regarding the crown prince resulted in a huge commotion. It was the hottest topic of conversation on every street corner. Of course, this also became an agenda at the House of Lords.

“Has the royal palace given thought to the influence of Planates?”

“With the situation unstable in Rindarl, why are we provoking the friendlier Planates?”

“But if the Eastern countries unite into the Rindarl Union, they’ll become an even larger threat than the Densel Dukedom.”

“Rather, isn’t it dangerous to snub the Queen’s son, just because she’s from Planates?”

“In the first place, there isn’t even a need to decide on a crown prince in such a rush. Prince Albert doesn’t reach adulthood until another four years.”

It became really chaotic as soon as the discussions began. While the House of Lords can’t directly interfere with the royal family’s inheritance issue, it can still indirectly influence it through the Upper House of Lords. The nobles got heated up instantly and immediately directed their bickering towards one of the representatives in the Upper House of Lords, Royal Earl Edna. On just what basis was the second prince gaining the position of crown prince?

Royal Earl Edna answered everyone with a bit of confusion in his own voice.

“Regarding the decision for a crown prince, I myself only found out about it from the royal family two months ago. Prime Minister Rittergau and all of us noble representatives opposed the decision. However, the church and every member of the royal family, with the exception of the queen, approved of making Prince Alfred into the crown prince.”

“Unbelievable. The royal family should know better than anyone how excellent Prince Albert is. The Melloart family aside, for everyone in the Teal family to support Prince Alfred as well.....”

The one who had just spoken on how unbelievable it was, was Margrave Genas. Since he's the lord of one of the most geographically important domains in Arxia, his statement actually carries more weight than that of a lower-ranking representative in the Upper House of Lords such as Royal Earl Edna.

Faced with a rebuke that he himself agreed with, Royal Earl Edna seemed like a frog who was staring down a snake about to eat him. “Take it easy, relax,” Earl Einsbark aimed to defuse the situation. Not only is he the leader of one of the border domains consisting of our country's line of defense as well as the commander of Fort Jugfena, he's also from a branch of the royal family with slightly less influence. It seems like one of his roles is to mediate matters between the royal family and the nobles.

While glancing about at the dispute, Earl Terejia began quietly explaining the situation in Rindarl to me. Compared to the adult nobles, I have a glaring lack of overall knowledge, which is why Earl Terejia often gives me short lectures whenever we attend conferences at the House of Lords.

“It can be said that it's currently a critical time in Rindarl right now. The four dukedoms are under pressure to unite into the Rindarl Union, doing away with the system of the four dukedoms that are remnants of the old Rindarl Kingdom. It means that the dukedoms will disappear and they may unite soon.”

“Well, the four dukedoms surround our entire eastern border. But, what's been suppressing their unity into one country so far?”

“It's been mostly just one matter. There is basically no difference in power amongst the four dukedoms. The matter of which among them would determine the central decisions, has been the biggest obstacle to them uniting.”

“They don't have someone among them who is politically influential enough to become the leader of all four dukedoms?”

I think it's quite interesting to learn about and deeply analyze political systems here. In my previous world, there was a different system where it was only considered natural that the king was all-powerful and could decide everything. In the case of Rindarl, where the four dukedoms are having difficulties truly coming to terms over

who gets to be at the top, I'm sure that it'll probably just result in having a figurehead leader.

"What will they do politically after they have created the Rindarl Union, I wonder?"

"Who knows..... Will they make use of the noble system and royal power, I wonder?"

"While that system can be quite flexible, it'll probably also increase their own internal power struggles."

"No matter the country's political system, one of its biggest headaches has always been the matter of inheritance of power at the top. Just like Arxia currently," the Earl suddenly chuckled. He still appeared to have a pale complexion. He'd recovered enough to get out of bed, but not fully. It seems that he was somewhat straining himself just by attending today's scheduled meeting.

"If the Rindarl Union is close to being established, isn't it definitely a bad idea to aggravate Planates right now?"

"It's difficult to say. It's indeed true that amongst the four dukedoms, Planates is the only one with a friendly trade agreement with us. However, Densel is clearly hostile, while we have almost zero contact with Giograd and Parmigran. So if our relationship with Planates worsens, it'll almost be inevitable that relations with the Rindarl Union would become overwhelmingly bad."

Nothing about this is difficult for me to understand. All the nobles that are currently opposing Second Prince Alfred from becoming the crown prince are probably worried for the same reason. Since Margrave Genas' domain borders Planates, it's only natural for him to be especially worried about this topic to the point of paranoia.

"But as some of the nobles were discussing earlier, the fact that her Royal Highness the Queen also retained her position as the daughter of the Duke of Planates has become a problem."

However, the problems associated with First Prince Albert becoming our next king, I can't infer them because my studies haven't reached that point yet. While I tried to figure out the reason from what the Earl has told me so far, I couldn't understand no matter how hard I thought about it. Well, it can't be helped, I'll ask the reason. As a fellow domain lord in charge of the eastern border's defense, I'll never be able to face Margrave Genas out of shame if I don't learn why First Prince Albert wasn't chosen.

“.....So why, did they decide this?”

“Hmph. Well..... Succession rights for the Duke of Planates isn’t limited only to males in his direct family, any men that are his blood relatives can qualify. Although eldest sons do get priority.”

Rather than answering me directly, he gave me yet another response that would require me to consider the information and come up with the answer myself. That’s his usual manner of doing things. It seems that Earl Terejia strongly emphasizes training my logical reasoning ability.

Since the Queen never gave up her position as the daughter of the Duke of Planates, that means she never gave up inheritance rights there..... Right. That means, her son, Prince Albert can inherit in Planates as well.....?

“Meaning, because her Royal Highness the Queen didn’t give up her position as the Planates Duke’s daughter, Prince Albert is also eligible to inherit, and can become the Duke of Planates. Is that it?”

“According to the law of Planates, that is correct.”

“I see. That could indeed be quite a problem.”

If Prince Albert becomes the crown prince, Arxia would almost certainly become controlled by Planates in the future. It would only be expected that even Planates would use Prince Albert to its own advantage.

There probably weren’t any issues when the Queen married into Arxia. However, there is now a looming presence known as the Rindarl Union that’s surfaced. It can definitely be quite dangerous for Arxia if the person who inherits the position and royal bloodline of King of Arxia also has close ties with enemies of Arxia.

I’ve finally figured it out. My head feels refreshed. Now that I have no more doubts and can see the political situation clearly, I suddenly felt really bored listening to the nobles bickering over the succession, without knowing the truth behind the matter.

As for what I think, what this all means, is that the royal family took the Rindarl situation into account when declaring a crown prince. After all, one of the first counter-arguments had been that neither prince was considered an adult yet, and there was no need to choose a crown prince so early.

“.....Mm,”

Then, suddenly, just like a flashback, a memory appeared from my sea of thoughts. It was a memory fragment that seemed like it was telling a story to me rather than actually belonging to me.

(The heroine of the otome game is Emilia Rindarl, daughter of the Archduke of the Rindarl Union. She came to the neighboring kingdom of Arxia with the hopes of getting married, which is why she entered the noble school here.....)

– That’s right. That was the prologue to the otome game.

But even so, I won’t consider that to be a future set in stone. I also held a vague feeling of conviction that no matter how much the House of Lords disputed the choice of Second Prince Alfred as the crown prince, that they would not be able to overturn the decision.

CHAPTER 86

PRIEST FARIS

The season for social gatherings was finally nearing its end, it's about time for the nobles to hire any staff they need from the capital and return to their domains.

After they return to their domains, the harvest season begins. As for us, since the refugees brought us pumpkins this year, and the egg-laying chickens we bought two years ago have been maintaining a steady production, the food available after this year's harvest should be slightly grander than before.

Thanks to the women that survived the era of my father's rule, we didn't lose some of the traditional ways to make some egg dishes. To me, that's a great relief. We've already lost some traditional recipes for meat and fish dishes due to a lack of supplies during that time.Thinking about it in reverse, I was able to take advantage of my family's status when I was young, and a few recipes were preserved by us. As for killing my family, I have to believe that I did the right thing. However, I can't deny that adding hemlock into that pot of soup that day was only an impulsive action at the time, due to me being tired of the situation I was in.

That's why, I always have to check to ensure I'm doing the right thing. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to remain mentally resilient and keep my spirit going. I won't allow myself to abandon the role of domain lord just because my heart falters.

"-Oi, oi, are you listening?"

I was startled as someone tapped me on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Ratoka with a bewildered look on his face. I had been too lost in thinking about my own emotional baggage to notice my surroundings, so I blinked once to return myself to normal.

".....Are you not feeling well?"

"No, I just wasn't paying attention because I was thinking about something."

At seeing the look on that child's face in front of me, I couldn't help but laugh a little. Seeing me doing so, Ratoka furrowed his eyebrows slightly.

“Get it together. What if you get assassinated, what would happen to me?”

“I doubt that I would be assassinated here in the royal capital at least.”

“Hnn..... But, you never know who might be planning something!”

As for me, I don't intend to go picking any fights, but until I'm able to fully rebuild my domain and make it into an iron defense as part of our country's border, I suppose there will naturally be some danger. What's more, there are also those that are angry at me simply because I received some of the country's national defense budget.

In any case, I took another good look at Ratoka.

“.....What is it?”

“Would you really be troubled if I died, I was wondering. One year ago, you were so energetic in saying that you'd kill me.”

“Y..... You! Is there no limit to how evil you can be!?”

With a sound of shock, Ratoka gave me a look of disgust. With the straight way he expresses his emotions, what a hot-blooded shonen protagonist he is. Also, I felt a sense of relief that I didn't feel any killing intent from him anymore.

“My bad, it was a bit much for a joke.”

“Honestly.Ah, that's right. To change the topic, I received a letter from the temple.”

“A letter?”

Ratoka brought out a letter for me, and upon closer inspection, it was sealed with a seal that I've never seen before. It's different from the church's seal which I'm familiar with, it was shaped in the form of the letter F instead – and only one person came to my mind, it had to be from that Chief Priest Faris.

When I checked the other side just to make sure, it was clearly addressed to Eliza Kaldia. It seems that there's no mistake.

“Ratoka. Bring me a letter opener.”

A letter has arrived for me from a priest which I have no particular close relationship with. I sat down in a chair and wondered just what was in the letter, as I sat there staring at it as if it would help me see through it.

I rapped on Ratoka's back when his shoulder drooped in fatigue as he gawked at the extravagant white temple adjacent to the royal palace.

"We're going."

".....That hurt you know!?"

When I put an end to his sulking with a sharp glare, I heard chuckling and guffawing sounds from Claudia who was a few steps behind me dressed in maid attire, as well as Gunther who was also acting as my bodyguard today.

I almost always take Ratoka and Claudia everywhere with me wherever I go these days, but I wonder just why Chief Priest Faris specifically invited the three of them by name to come along with me.

"Why was it these three people....."

I muttered that to myself as I stepped into the dazzling marble temple. That priest especially had no reason to know about Ratoka. Just when and where did the priest learn about it, I wonder if Earl Terejia had informed Faris since they seem to be good friends.

"It's said that Chief Priest Faris has the god's own eyes."

Maybe she heard me muttering to myself, Claudia started chatting about all the information she's heard in town as she's much more caught up on local gossip than I am, on that priest I know nothing about.

"It seems that Faris-dono's mother was from the Melloart royal family, while she herself was the daughter of a duke. There's also a rumor that she used to be Earl Terejia's fiancée, but that's from a really long time ago."

".....Hah?"

Faris is the daughter of a duke, and what's more she used to be engaged to Earl Terejia when they were both much younger? That means that she's probably within ten years of age to Earl Terejia. So she's around seventy, give or take.....?

"Yes, she has a rather strange background. You usually don't see someone of such high status entering the church."

"The degree to which it's said her god's eyes can see things, it's impossible to do by the natural laws of the world. Maybe the church unexpectedly does actually have some sort of divine power."

Since I was the only one among us who had ever met Chief Priest Faris directly before, Ratoka and Claudia felt no sort of shock at all at the approximate real age of the priest we were about to meet.

Ratoka aside, if even Claudia doesn't understand Chief Priest Faris's "god's eyes," this priest might really have some sort of mysterious power that I don't comprehend.Well, there're very few monks and priests that interact very often within noble social circles, so maybe even a lot of them actually have some sort of divine powers.

– But anyway, god's eyes, eh.

I remembered back to my birthday celebration when I was six years old, to the scales that balanced my good and evil deeds that Chief Priest Faris prepared for me. Even though absolutely nobody should have known about it, my deepest secret was exposed. The other two people there at that time, Kamil and Earl Terejia, also shouldn't have known about it.

Even on the verge of death, Kamil didn't seem to have known that I was the one who ended up inadvertently framing his father.

As for the Earl, I wonder if maybe he knew everything. When I think back on it, that parchment with the list of people that died which appeared on the scale could only have been prepared by him. Neither of us have ever discussed it, but I can infer from it that he must have been informed of the ceremony's contents beforehand.

The remainder of the walk to the specified location inside the temple was done in silence. Although I do feel nervous about what Faris is going to say to me, about having my weakness in her grasp, strangely I didn't feel the same sense of fear that I did last year.

CHAPTER 87

TALKING WITH THE ELDERLY

Shanak Temple – this white temple standing adjacent to the royal palace gave this street of nobles an even more elegant and refined impression than the Grand Temple of Misorua just a little bit further down the street. Commoners also use the Grand Temple though, while this is the center of the street of nobles, so it's mainly nobles, and in particular royals, that use Shanak Temple.

"That was fast. I thought you'd get lost."

In the deepest part of the temple, there was a small church that usually wasn't open to outsiders. Priest Faris who was waiting for us there, greeted us with the same inscrutable, androgynous voice that I remembered.

The temple has the most complex interior structure that I've ever seen. We didn't get lost though, astonishingly enough because Claudia led the way.

".....Is it some sort of wild natural instinct?"

I heard Claudia chuckling slightly from beside me. Although I wasn't exactly praising her just now.

"Yes, her instincts are excellent. Alright, come over here and relax. Today, I just wanted you to have a long talk with the elderly person that I am."

A suspicious smile that I couldn't read appeared on Priest Faris's face, as she indicated towards a chair for me to sit in. Since Claudia is playing the role of my maid today, she pulled it forward for me, and I sat down. Claudia and Ratoka sat down on a sofa placed by the wall, and Faris finally stopped smiling that creepy smile of hers.

– I wonder if she's tired? She's expressionless, and I really can't tell that Faris is around the same age as Earl Terejia. No wait, that's only assuming that Claudia's earlier story about Faris's background was accurate.

"This is to be our third meeting now, young one?"

“Yes, that’s correct.”

Faris stared right into my eyes as I answered her without any hesitation. What is this, I couldn’t help but draw myself back a little. She seems even more evidently eerie than before. Faris squinted at me, as if she was probing the depths of my eyes for something in silence.

“.....You’ve absorbed and synchronized fast. I can barely see her anymore. Has it accelerated?”

Faris suddenly muttered something under her breath.

“-Eh?”

It was so unexpected that I had no idea what she was talking about, but Faris ignored my reaction of surprise and continued as if she hadn’t muttered anything at all just now. It seemed like she’d returned to the state she was in the first time we met, with that composed smile of hers as she stared directly into my eyes. Then, the feeling I had earlier that she may be elderly suddenly vanished. Faris really does have an inscrutable gender and age, it gives her an otherworldly, mysterious feeling.

“How’s Siegmund been doing lately? I heard that he’s been getting quite a lot more wrinkles on his face recently.”

Faris started the conversation as if it was a perfectly ordinary one, and I felt myself expelling my breath that I was holding.

“He still hasn’t fully recovered yet. It would be nice if he would get healthy again.”

“Well, humans have limits, it’s only natural that they can’t win against old age. And he’s always been one to push himself unreasonably. Even though that’s not good for him.”

Faris seemed to chuckle from the back of her throat, and her lips curved slightly upwards in the faintest hint of a smile. I don’t know if the story about her once being Earl Terejia’s fiancée is true or not, but it definitely does seem that they have some sort of connection.

“Work is just piling up so much. I would really like for him to make a full recovery and return as well, but.....”

“Well, how will it turn out, I wonder.We’ve already reached an age where it wouldn’t be strange for either of us to die at any moment.”

That seems to be a rather deep statement. I couldn’t help but take a deep breath at her use of the word “we.” I’m sure that Faris is prepared for death at any moment. Regardless of how mysteriously young she may look on the outside, she’s accepted her old age – along with death.

“Are you feeling tired?”

“No. However, I’m satisfied in life, I am. As for Siegmund, he worries over too many things.”

“If Earl Terejia suddenly passed away, I’m sure he would have many regrets.”

“I’ll bet.”

It’s nothing to laugh over, but it’s also nothing to get shaken over, this is just a solemn story, I think. Even though we’re talking about death, the atmosphere doesn’t seem all that heavy, I wonder if that’s thanks to Faris.

“.....The gods will definitely bestow upon my soul the gift of eternal sleep. It will be a pleasure.”

Faris’s eyes once again seemed to probe into mine. Those words passed through my ear canals and reached my brain, without tugging on any emotions, and settled down within my heart.

“If..... Just hypothetically speaking. If your soul wasn’t allowed to rest after death, and was sent back to this world..... What does Faris-dono think of such a thing?”

Before I realized it, the question had already spilled from my mouth. Faris had a child’s look of innocence on her face for an instant, then the smile returned as if to brush away my question. It was a smile of loving kindness, while simultaneously being a smile of pity. It was a beautiful smile just like that of Saint Shanak’s, I was shocked inside that Faris could make such a smile as well.

“The god Misorua does not have the power to revive a soul for a second life. There’s no good luck, bad luck, or destiny, everything is all coincidence. Use your own power

to carve your path in life, grab what you deserve, and struggle, that's all. To your life's utmost limits."

These words from an elderly person, they're so heavy. However, I did obediently calm down. I nodded, and Faris's saint-like smile changed instantly again. Even though it was just the slight inscrutable smile again from earlier, the change in expression was so abrupt that it left me stunned for a short moment. From behind me, I heard Ratoka who had been silent until now moaning faintly.

"Well then, let's cut to the chase and get to the main topic. I didn't invite you here today to deepen your faith in the church, or to hear about how Siegmund has been doing recently."

"Yes, of course."

Probably neither of us have that much free time. There must be some sort of reason that she called me out here today, some sort of use she had for me.

"In every organization, when lots of people gather, there will be differences in opinion, and even factions that appear. The larger the organization, the more apparent the differences will become. Well, it's said that factions appear whenever three or more people gather together."

.....Is she talking about the House of Lords, I wonder. There's still some small ongoing conflicts about the matter of the crown prince. Strangely enough, she felt like Earl Terejia whenever he was teaching me something, so I couldn't help but change my attitude and prepare myself to listen.

"It's the same within the church."

However, Faris's statement was so earth shattering and shocking that I was left mouth wide agape and frozen solid.

CHAPTER 88

SINCERE COUNSEL

“Before the Kingdom of Arxia existed in this world, kings and their retainers would marry those from the church, while their children and relatives would be left to the land and the citizens.”

“.....Really?”

“Indeed, it’s true. Long ago, the church was responsible for recording the history of countries. Nobody is allowed to tamper with history, we are in charge of protecting history and telling history truthfully as it occurred.”

As Faris nodded her head affirmatively, I thought back to Mrs. Marshan’s history lessons. The origin of nobles, was said to be from when the king recognized his greatest supporters. Thinking back on it, although the lessons were vague, the greatest supporters must have been the church, there’s probably no mistake.

But, considering the power of nobles versus the church today, I must say that it was at least a little hard to believe for a moment. The church is deep-rooted in Arxia, and it shares a common destiny with the country. However, their true power within Arxia is limited. As for their influence, it’s mostly in regards to their responsibilities as keepers of the “law.”

“Of course, it’s fine. The Sacred Code does not prohibit it. Order remains protected.”

However, this time I noticed Faris’s eyebrows becoming slightly furrowed for the first time. I’ve never seen this expression of hers before.

“Currently, there’s some foolish people within the church. They’re disturbing the order and creating chaos, and guiding the country to a path of destruction, and they harbor strong desires and greed even though they swore loyalty to Misorua, the god of Law and Order.”

Faris declared so in a strongly accusing tone of voice, then she moved her line of sight to behind me. When I followed her line of vision, I saw Ratoka sitting there frozen solid. I understood very clearly that Faris was looking at Ratoka in particular.

“.....Is there something the matter with my servant?”

“Nothing in particular. However, I believe that your servant knows something about what I am currently discussing.”

Somehow Faris’s smile gave off a wretched feeling, and Ratoka seemed to shrivel up in fear.

“Faris-dono, my servant was born and raised in a village here in Kaldia. Even in the royal capital, this one never leaves my side. I doubt that this one is involved in any sort of plots regarding our country’s destruction.”

Even I find this difficult to believe, I don’t think there’s any reason for Faris to question Ratoka. However, as I covered for him, Ratoka’s complexion became even paler. Is it really just like Faris said, does he know something?

My palms began to sweat with impatience. This is bad, I need to calm down. I subtly took a deep breath, trying not to attract anyone’s attention.

“Of course, Viscountess Kaldia. I don’t believe that your servant is complicit in such a plot either. But, even so, this servant seems to know something about it?”

Faris didn’t stop looking directly at Ratoka at all, and in contrast to my impatience, her voice remained relaxed. Without a doubt, Faris seems to be fully confident of it. No, maybe I should say she’s somehow confirmed it already?

“In a place called Cyril village of Kaldia, there were some sisters doing supposed missionary work while spreading dangerous ideologies. It happened right in the domain you were born and raised in. Don’t you know something about this? ‘Elise-dono.’”

.....Goosebumps are crawling on my skin. Just what and how much does this priest know? “Elise” as well as which village she came from, that’s information that I’ve kept as tightly under wraps as possible. Even if Earl Terejia has long associated with Faris, I doubt that he would tell Faris, a complete outsider to the Kaldia domain, about such things.

How did this priest know? Does having “god’s eyes” have anything to do with this?

“.....Urk.”

Ratoka seemed to choke while trying to say something. He remained completely frozen solid while his eyes kept darting between me and Faris. He kept gulping and swallowing repeatedly. He kept shaking all over, but finally straightened himself out.

“- As for being born and raised in Kaldia, I believe that I should also be counted.”

Faris seemed slightly surprised, and returned her line of vision from Ratoka to me again. Her smile seems to have disappeared. I continued my words with a bit of a refreshed feeling.

“It seems that Faris-dono already knows something regarding this issue of sisters in Kaldia that have been spreading dangerous sentiments under the guise of doing missionary work. Just what additional information could a child of the same age as me provide to you on this matter?”

“.....Mmm. It seems that you place quite a lot of trust in your servant, Viscountess Kaldia.”

“Indeed. This one is a citizen of my domain. How can I be a proper lord without putting trust in my own citizens?”

Faris blinked several times, then seemed to start grinning. Is that so, she nodded, and her shoulders shaking in laughter helped to dissipate the sense of her overwhelming pressure.

“What you say is quite right. However, I would sincerely advise you to not keep that one by your side.”

.....Sincere advice, she says? With what she’s telling me, as well as the way she’s saying it, I feel both uncomfortable and skeptical. Even when I frowned slightly, Faris didn’t change her expression.

“It’ll become your weakness. If you can’t let go of that one, you need to keep a much closer eye on things.”

Her voice sounded almost lyrical. However, my stomach felt much, much heavier than before.

“.....I’ll keep your words in mind.”

My words sounded like they were crawling along the ground. I have nothing brilliant to say, no comeback. Why is it that this priest is so good at riling me up?

“Don’t make such a scary face. Right now, you need to be even more cautious and vigilant than before.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

“The sisters that were in Cyril village before, seem to be having frequent dealings with the Nordsturms currently.”

【 PART II 】

CHAPTER 89

WINTER AND THE NEW CITIZENS, PART 1

Strangely, somehow time went by uneventfully without anything happening at all.

The commotion over choosing the crown prince gradually settled down as well after some time passed. The season for socializing has now ended, and all the nobles that were just so active in the royal capital have each returned to their own domains, since it's difficult to keep a topic going forever no matter how controversial it is.

Although I say that, it hasn't calmed down completely yet. That commotion definitely caused factions to form within the nobility supporting either prince, especially with regards to nobles in the royal palace.

Just like the other nobles, Earl Terejia and I also returned to Kaldia at the end of summer. There seemed to be no movements from the northern nobles that we remained on guard against, nor was there any contact from Faris about the activities of the sisters in the Nordsturm domain. With the usual high amount of work as well as dealing with the autumn harvest, autumn was almost over already before I realized it.

"The snow should be arriving soon....."

"Ahh, is it already this time of year? One year sure went by fast."

It's now the last month of August, and the air in Kaldia has a chilly bite to it, snow should be arriving at any moment. Regardless of the calendar date, when snow arrives, that means winter is here.

Ever since I've returned to the Mansion of Golden Hills from the royal capital, I've had virtually no time to even leave, every day has been hectic with sending out letters, compiling information and reports, writing documents, learn from Mrs. Marshan's lectures, work with Earl Terejia, or practicing the bow and sword..... Well, that's how I spent every day, so it's no wonder that an entire season passed before I noticed.

I've been spending every day so habitually like this that I didn't even realize how exhausted my body was until now, so I sighed lightly. It became a white mist that quickly dissipated in the chilly air.

I'm currently wrapped in a thick woolen cloak, and riding east together with Claudia by horse. Before a full-fledged winter gets here, I need to check on the state of the village for the new citizens.

"You don't seem to have any ambition or aspirations at all right now, Alicia-dono. You're probably feeling tired? You should take a rest and relax a bit at Teo's."

"It's Eliza, Claudia-dono."

"Mm, sorry."

".....I suppose you're right. I am a little tired."

I was so tired that I didn't even have the energy to pretend I wasn't as I nodded to Claudia. She also seemed to be slightly fatigued as she replied, of course you are.

Ever since Earl Terejia started feeling unwell earlier this summer, he hasn't gotten much better. Of course, I can't let the work he usually does be not done, so I've gotten a lot more familiar with his work.

No matter how hard I work, I can't do everything by myself, so I've left all military work related to the domain up to Claudia, Gunther, and the oldest soldier in the army, Calvin. Unfortunately, Gunther and Calvin basically don't know how to read or write, so all the documents are left up to Claudia.

Also unexpectedly, Claudia has gotten quite busy as well, she's basically taken over the role of army instructor from Earl Terejia. Not only does she teach the army personal combat techniques, she's also sharp in tactics and strategy. It seems that she's extremely skilled at everything military.

It's clear to see that both of us are overworked. It's hard because I lack people I can use.

"It's hurts that 'Elise' isn't here right now....."

Even though I know there's nothing I can do about it, I couldn't help but let that comment slip out.

"Well, he was brainwashed before. It can't be helped."

Claudia seemed to make an attempt at consoling me. "Elise" – or Ratoka, I've been keeping him far away from the other Elise this autumn, as well as keeping him under surveillance. The Nordsturms seem to be connected to the group of sisters that planted anti-nobility sentiments in him in the past. They might find out about Ratoka's existence and take advantage of him somehow to slip through a crack in our defenses. That's why I'm on guard.

I know. I was the one who came up with, and carried out the idea to confine him. Even so, I can't keep a hold on my emotions.

Is this, any different from what I did to Kamil?

"....."

".....Eliza-dono?"

I shook my head to try and clear it of these dark emotions.

".....Nothing. On our return tomorrow, I was thinking about staying at Nezu village."

"Ahh, those girls. It's good that the wounds in their hearts are healing."

Claudia nodded, and our conversation ended there. We traveled the rest of the way in silence.



"My lord! You've finally arrived."

At the entrance to the new village, Teomer was standing there and greeted us, waving his left hand. Claudia and I both waved our hands as well in greeting.

"Hey, Teo. It's been a while. How are the preparations for winter going?"

“Long time no see. I see that you barely have any energy just like usual. As for winter preparations..... It’s going well, is what I would have liked to say.”

Looking at him, Teomer’s skin seems to be considerably tanner than before after spending an entire summer in Kaldia. He used to be a little reddish, but now he’s closer to the color of wheat.

“The irrigation work isn’t as far along as I expected.”

Teomer gave me a brief report as we entered the village gate. There’s no other villages close by to here, but we did have a wall built around the village for crime prevention.

When I entered the village, I saw several inelegant stone buildings, with only the foundations built. Similarly, there were also only a few paths that had been paved with stone, and their own self-made nomad tents as well as the simple tents donated from other domains were lined up all over the place.

This is the current situation in the village for the new citizens. I see six more buildings than when I was here last time and had to go to the royal capital. However, this isn’t enough for six hundred villagers to live in. Originally these buildings are meant for about five people to live in, and right now double that number is living in each building. Even so, there’s still about four hundred people still currently living in tents.

“Right now, we’re having the children and elderly live in the ‘buildings’ and our own tents, but.....”

“It’s unreasonable to pass winter in Kaldia with only tents. Since you’ve taken all this trouble to become my citizens, I can’t have you all dying and going to visit Misorua in less than one year.”

When it’s spring in this area, melted snow from the Amon Nor mountains will cause the water levels of lakes and rivers to overflow and even flood. That’s why we have to elevate the level of buildings we construct here, and we’re doing flood control work at the Sera River and the surrounding lakes, but since there’s many people among the new citizens that aren’t suited for labor work like children and the elderly, in addition to the fact that they aren’t used to doing this type of work, it seems that things have been progressing slower than expected. On top of all this, this village is the farthest one from the Mansion of Golden Hills, as well as being located far away from other villages. It’s risky to have such an isolated and ramshackle village face the deep snow of winter in Kaldia by itself.

“.....Alright. I’m sorry, but let’s have all the new citizens stay in the area under direct control for this winter.”

CHAPTER 90

WINTER AND THE NEW CITIZENS, PART 2

After confirming with Teo that his tribe would agree to spend winter in the area under direct control, there were no more big projects for the time being. I spent the rest of the day on listening to how people's lives were, what basic necessities were insufficient, learning who was sick and injured, learning all the finer details to the best of my limits. Based on all of this, I need to decide on what needs to be purchased and what Lord Carson's carpenters should work on first, next spring when they arrive. As soon as I get back to the mansion, I need to talk to Bellway about it all as well.

For dinner, I asked them to make me whatever they usually ate, and for lodging I just asked to stay in one of their simple buildings with some other children. My new citizens that have very little concept of a nobility system and the difference in rank between commoners and nobles accepted readily.

The meal that night consisted of pumpkins, boiled fish from the river, horse milk, some vegetables mixed with fish, and a cheese soup. The pumpkin's texture was smoother than I thought it would be, and not as sweet as I expected, but still delicious. Although everything I described seemed normal, it tastes like they probably put cheese into every dish. Since they keep a small herd of goats, they must also have some way of obtaining citrus fruits for the acidity necessary in the process of making goat cheese. Now that wild fruits have been lost to Kaldia, even cheese is considered quite a luxury item.

"So this is a pumpkin. How delicious! It's a vegetable with such a rich taste!"

"Indeed."

Claudia seemed to really like the pumpkins. She took the second serving offered to her in silence with a stuffed mouth and an expression full of joy.

Later in the evening, I listened to children the same age as me tell stories about fishing and hunting, and I think I strangely fell asleep for the first time in my life while chatting excitedly without having to think about anything difficult at all. I thought that it was actually just pure and fun. To the extent where I felt a little lonely the next morning.



“My lord!? Wh, what.....?”

When I returned to stay at Nezu village, the mayor’s wife was so shocked..... Or maybe I should say she was terrified. Well, I guess I did visit unannounced, so it can’t be helped.

“Ahh, sorry for surprising you.I came to see those girls from before, I just happened to stop by here after a trip to the village for my new citizens.”

“Those, uh, girls?”

I confirmed it again for the mayor who still seemed to be puzzled. After I nodded, they hurriedly tried to have those girls summoned right away, while I rushed as well to stop them.

“C, call them here immediately!”

“Wait, you don’t need to call them here to see me. I’ll go visit them myself.”

Those two village girls seemed to be regaining their energy despite a lingering fear of men. Although they couldn’t do any work in the fields or heavy labor, it seemed like they were maintaining the agricultural tools, making ropes, and taking care of some chickens.

I didn’t have the time to chat with as many villagers as possible like in the village under construction, so after I asked some villagers about their winter preparations, I continued on my way back to the mansion. It’s already been five years since Earl Terejia’s become my guardian and begun enacting his policies in Kaldia, it seems that life is returning here little by little. I wonder if it’s about time that we can begin producing cloths and threads on our own again without having to rely on imports.

It might be fine to purchase some goats from Henznaut domain next year. Or maybe if the new citizens’ goats do really well and increase in number, I can buy some from them. I have to revive technologies and techniques in Kaldia.



With new citizens' tents were lined up on a hill north of the Mansion of Golden Hills, I saw the sight of clear skies after the first snow of winter for the first time. Although Earl Terejia had told me about how it looked last year, I missed it back then. At that time I was busy with work as well as recuperating from my long sleep, so I hardly stepped out of the mansion.

Now I can avoid having the new citizens being forced to deal with unfamiliar weather and an unfamiliar land all by themselves. There's many elderly and children among them, and in a new land with different customs, they'll reach a high level of dissatisfaction quickly if I don't do anything for them.

That's not all though, there's also benefits to having them here. The largest village in all of Kaldia, Claria village, which is located south of the area under direct control, seems to be interested trading with the new citizens as well as learning about their culture. Although Claria village is fairly close to the area under direct control, it happened to be the village least affected by my father's rampage, and it was also the village where Earl Terejia's aid reached first. A lot of soldiers in training come from this village, and the regular Kaldia army also has many soldiers with family members in this village, so anti-noble sentiments are quite weak here. Also, since there's a lot of commoners from other domains that end up staying here if they visit Kaldia, it's a place that's also friendly to the new citizens.

"Last year, we traded our pumpkins, livestock, dairy products, and cloths for things like bread, eggs, straw, rye, and so on. I think some people also got cooking utensils."

According to Teo, it seems that bartering is something their tribe does often. As for some of the older Kaldia citizens that experienced life before my father's despotic rule, it seems that cheese was what they wanted the most. It seems that there's a few words in common between the Artolan language and some words from ancient times in the Jugfena region, so they've been able to communicate with each other at a basic level.

"If possible, please actively trade this year. Claria village is well populated, and things of all sorts gather there, it also has a lot of contact with the other villages. It's the most appropriate location for you guys to be accepted by the villagers."

I also chatted with Teo about how his tribe was spending winter as I helped him corral the horses in a simple wooden fence that my soldiers had helped construct. Although

the Shiru horses are smaller in size than my army's horses, it seems that they're quite compact and muscular all over with excellent stamina. Although they're trained, they still have wild temperaments and it was a bit difficult for me to get through the fence as I wasn't used to them.

"But at the moment we can't afford to sell any of our livestock, nor are we able to produce cheese."

".....I believe I can have lemons imported. Would you be able to make at least a little cheese? In exchange, how about providing you an additional ten goats in the spring?"

At any rate, if I buy goats for my domain, the Shiru tribe would be the best at taking care of them anyways. I also intend to give some goats to Claria village and Nezu village where they already have the ability to take care of livestock again, but since I'm buying a new type of goat for the first time, I want to let the Shiru tribe handle the goats first and hopefully be able to pass down some techniques on goat handling.

"Ten goats, eh..... Alright, I'll have a word with the other chiefs about this."

"You're a great help. Also, will you go and see the cavalry troops sometime this year?"

"Ahh, that won't be a problem. Also, you should be there as well, can you participate? How else will you lead if you don't know how to handle a horse and form battle formations?"

Although my newly established cavalry troops from last year are guided by retired cavalry troops from Earl Ruktoferd's domain, the instructors return to Ruktoferd for the duration of winter. And so this time, I'm hoping to improve my cavalry's efficiency by having the Shiru tribe that's used to being on horseback year-round observe their training. It seems that there's some fundamental differences in how to handle their horses.

"Even though it's winter, as long as life has stabilized for the tribe, it should be fine to have some warriors join the army....."

"Is that really fine? Aren't they considered an important existence to protect the tribe?"

"No, now my people are currently protected by you, not our warriors. Didn't you also pick up the path of the warrior, in order to protect our pride?"

Teo was grinning devilishly as he said so. Indeed, it's as he says.

".....I suppose. There's no problem with treating you as my private soldiers."

"Use us well. You're our King now."

–Mmm??

I heard myself being addressed as something that I'm almost sure I misheard, but I decided to ignore it. Maybe to them the position above that of their chief is simply their King. That's probably all it is.

CHAPTER 91

TO KILL HIM OR LET HIM LIVE, WHICH IS MY TRUE INTENTION?

As a traditional stone building constructed in my great-grandfather's time, the Mansion of Golden Hills gets quite chilly in winter. In rooms without a fireplace, the cold feels like it can pierce down to your bones, and the floors and walls are icy cold as well.

Of course, the dungeon with no functions for warmth installed in it whatsoever is even colder. While there are some small holes drilled in the dungeon leading to the ground for ventilation, it seems that the dungeon is actually even colder during winter than our storage facilities.

There's quite some strong wind drafts in winter, and the fires lighting up the dungeon were weakened significantly by it. I clasped my thick fur cloak tightly around my body as I descended deep into the dungeon, listening to the sound of someone rattling the iron bars.

"What's wrong, you're causing such a commotion?"

"Let me out of here! Please! I'll freeze and die....."

The painfully distressed voice coming from the other side of the iron bars was one of the two prisoners I had secretly kept for myself and put in here earlier this summer, a blonde-haired bandit with a tall, lanky body. His light clothes didn't do very much to ward off the cold, and he was shivering. His originally blonde hair was also changing to a muddy hue of dirty blonde, becoming matted with filth.

"Shut up..... Don't do something like beg for your life.....!"

From the adjacent cell, the other bandit, the first one I interrogated, was shouting weakly in anger with all his remaining strength. It seems that since he's middle-aged, it's taken a harder toll on his body. I wonder if the blonde bandit is shivering more because of the cold or because of everything that's happened to the other bandit. When I just stood there silently without saying anything to either of them, the blonde

bandit turned around and started yelling at the other bandit in frustration and impatience.

“You shut up! If you want to die so much, go die by yourself!! I..... don’t want to freeze to death here!”

“You bastard..... Have you forgotten your loyalty to our gods.....!?”

“Who cares about that!!”

The blonde man was smacking the iron bars. It seems that after being imprisoned for so long, his spirit was finally giving in to the cold of winter and the threat of losing his life.

“Hey, I’ll tell you anything..... Anything at all..... Help me, please let me out of here..... My feet, my feet hurt so much I can’t bear it.....!”

His feet hurting so much that he can’t bear it, he’s probably talking about frostbite. Since I didn’t give them any shoes or socks, it seems that his feet developed frostbite first, before his fingers. It’s now been seven days since the first snow of winter, and temperatures have dropped harshly. His injuries have probably already undergone necrosis.

“.....I see. Sure, it’s fine. If you tell me everything you know, I’ll let you out of there. I’ll also have your feet treated.”

I think I sound terribly similar to a cat right now. I can even feel myself licking my lips for once.

“Really!?!?”

“Of course. To be honest, I can’t afford to keep taking care of people that take too long to decide anyways.”

As the blonde man shouted in elation, the other bandit was moaning with an anger-filled voice.

“What’s, this! How can this be!!”

“You just shut up!!”

“You bastard, are you this shameless!”

I merely watched silently and observed as both men lost all their self-control and shouted angrily at each other. It doesn't seem like they are acting. I ignored their continued arguing, and had my soldiers take the blonde bandit out of his jail cell.

“Valon! Don't go!!”

Finally, the door to the dungeon closed, leaving behind the sorrowful cries of the remaining bandit. I told my soldiers that were helping the blonde bandit named Valon to stand to take him to the interrogation room in the barracks, while I went upstairs to call for Rashiok.

On the third floor, I found Rashiok sleeping in front of Ratoka's room. Why is he here, I wonder. Because I'm self-conscious about having Ratoka placed under house arrest again, I've been avoiding him these days. What I will say to him, what he might say back to me, it's only natural that I have no idea what to tell him.

On the day that I talked with Chief Priest Faris, I had Ratoka return to the Mansion of Golden Hills immediately without listening to any of his excuses.

Last winter, after I woke up from an entire month of sleeping, Ratoka had told me in detail why he'd thrown a rock at me. The story according to Ratoka seemed to be that ever since his birth, his mother had gone insane and constantly abused him, and he also picked up a hatred of the nobility from the villagers, which developed into a killing intent against the domain lord. His story had never mentioned anything about sisters planting the seeds of anti-noble sentiments.

That's why I judged things to be dangerous. There's many people gathered in the royal capital. I was worried about the risk of those sisters who seem to be connected to the Nordsturms somehow finding Ratoka again and “reusing” him in some way.

Ratoka never mentioned the sisters since he didn't have any suspicions towards their activities – also, because Ratoka didn't want to mention any of his memories involving his personal emotions. Meaning, there's a definite crack in Ratoka's spirit from which the sisters can slip into and potentially take advantage of.

But even if I tell that to Ratoka right now, he wouldn't be able to understand the truth behind my actions. All I can do is, keep away from him, and keep him safe and protected while also keeping him under house arrest.

.....Of course, this is just what I'm telling myself.

It's obvious that my emotions might not agree with what I'm doing. Honestly, I truly don't want to do such a thing to him.

Rashiok made a sound of surprise in his throat at seeing the look of self-loathing in my eyes. While draconis are highly intelligent, they don't have as many complicated things to think about like humans do, so they express their emotions simply.

If you don't want to be hated by Ratoka, then just don't do anything that Ratoka would hate you for, it's just that simple, is what Rashiok's eyes seemed to be trying to tell me.

CHAPTER 92

PIERCING WORDS

I intended for Rashiok to be there alongside me at the interrogation of the blond bandit Valon. That man isn't used to the existence of such a large beast. Rashiok's presence alone should be enough to terrify and fluster him greatly.

However, Rashiok wouldn't move from his position in front of Ratoka's room. Since he's much bigger than I am, no matter how much I pushed him, he wouldn't budge. This rascal, I kept calling him various names mentally. I couldn't help myself and suddenly remembered a wide variety of colorful and vulgar swear words from my previous life. I glared at the draconis laying there casually, taking up most of the entire corridor while wagging his serpentine tail back and forth.

Will I have to give up on bringing Rashiok with me? I don't absolutely have to have Rashiok with me at the interrogation. The bandit's spirit had already been weakened by the cold to the point that he was begging for his life. I thought about it and figured I could also use various other methods if I had to return the bandit to the dungeon, so I let go of Rashiok and was about to leave.

.....At that moment, I fell flat on my face in the hallway. I'm feeling an intense pain and heat from my nose right now. Thanks to the carpet flooring, it didn't hurt as much as it could have, but it still hurt. More importantly, there's something else. There's a terrible pressure on my back. I'm pretty sure it's Rashiok's front paw. I can also hear his breathing really close to me, so his face is probably close to me. He also seems to be holding onto the edge of my cloak so that I couldn't stand back up, and he was the one who made me fall over, what a rascal.

I raised my face a little and pressed my hand against my nose, feeling a warm liquid trickling down. My nose is bleeding.

".....Rashiok."

I managed to utter his name the best I could with my face to the ground, but the weight on my back wouldn't disappear. I grudgingly wiped my nosebleed a little with my sleeve rather than letting it drip. While my clothes are rather expensive, the carpet is even more so.

Then, a small figure started coming up the stairs. It's Ratoka, holding a book under his arm. What timing.

"Eh..... Huh?"

Ratoka seemed to be more confused than anything else. Of course he would be. I could only imagine how different I looked from usual, with my nose bleeding as I'm laying flat against the floor with Rashiok's paw pressing me down.

".....Um, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

Hearing the frustration in my voice, Ratoka hurriedly came over and knocked on Rashiok's head a few times as he was still sitting on top of me. Then finally, the weight casually disappeared from my back.

That bastard. Once again, I cursed at Rashiok mentally. So this was his aim to begin with.

"Uh..... For the time being, let's stop your nosebleed."

With an indescribable expression on his face, Ratoka opened the door to his room.

There was a bed, a desk, a chest of drawers, and a bookshelf with some papers and books on it. In the year since this room had become Ratoka's, nothing had changed except that there was now a bookshelf. It's only natural since I haven't given him any other furniture nor a salary. However, looking around the room while sitting on his bed, I couldn't help but feel that his room seemed so wide and empty and a little cold, and I wondered if I should give him a sofa.

"Here, a cloth to stem your nosebleed."

Ratoka's mouth was bent into the shape of the \sim character as he looked to see how I was doing. As soon as he saw that I was still holding my nose with my tunic's sleeve, he took out a clean cotton cloth for me from the first aid kit on his shelf and also opened the window in his room for me to get some fresh air. I obediently sat still for a while, and my nosebleed naturally stopped bleeding on its own. The pain from face planting is also fading. But if I leave right now, I have a feeling that Rashiok will do the same thing to me all over again.

I was momentarily confused over what to say, but I ended up asking:

“How is Elise-sama doing?”

“She had a small seizure earlier today, and she’s now resting. Lately she’s been having seizures more and more often. Even though she’s been getting fevers less often than before, in this past year.....”

Ratoka hasn’t had any work to do while Elise had been sleeping. He seems to be passing the time by reading books, and he just happened to have gotten a new book to read when he returned to his room. Like Ratoka said, when Elise first came here, she often did nothing but sleep as she lacked physical fitness and would always be getting fevers, but after staying a while in the more temperate climate of Kaldia, her physical condition improved and she was no longer bedridden like before. That’s why I furrowed my eyebrows at the report that her seizures have become more common again.

“The doctor is examining the current situation, but it also seems like Elise herself agrees that she’s getting worse.”

“Please encourage her as much as possible. I’ll do what I can to visit her whenever possible as well.”

Elise’s seizures are also greatly influenced by her state of mind. If she feels weak mentally, she’ll have more seizures.

“Please do that. Ever since you’ve put me here again, you haven’t visited Elise even once.”

“.....Is that so.”

It’s Ratoka that I wanted to avoid, not Elise, but since Ratoka is still in charge of dealing with Elise for me, I’ve been avoiding Elise’s room as well. I’ve been making the excuse to myself that I’m too busy with work to go see her, but actually I’m feeling quite guilty about not going to chat with her. When I just nodded without saying anything else, Ratoka just stared at me.

“.....I can’t even be myself and I have to use someone else’s name, I’m not allowed to use my own.”

His voice was strangely cold. I looked again at Ratoka in surprise. He seemed to be expressionless, nothing but ice.

“Do you not even need me anymore?”

He almost spat that at me, then he seemed to awkwardly deride himself.

“.....The fact that you didn’t kill me, I know that I’m supposed to be grateful and not think about it. But I’ve always been wondering. Just why you went to the trouble of giving me an education, and keeping me by your side. It seems that you like me quite a bit. Are you just spoiling me?”

“That’s not it.”

Despite me saying so, I was in doubt of myself. I could see what Ratoka is saying. Even I was slightly aware of it, that I had sealed off my emotions this past year.

“I don’t think I’m wrong. I think you’re overlapping me with Kamil.”

My throat froze up. Even though I wanted to tell him to stop, I couldn’t say anything.

“You’re just using me as that guy’s replacement.”

My head feels hot. Various emotions are running through me to the point that my hands are shaking. My vision is flickering.

He knows. Better than I do myself, he’s seen into the inner workings of my heart better than I have.

“-Ah,”

A tiny sound escaped from the back of my throat. At that same moment, someone knocked on the door to Ratoka’s room.

CHAPTER 93

MY CURRENT ANSWER

“Eliza, ‘Elise.’ Are you both here?”

“.....Earl Terejia? Yes, Eliza-sama is currently here.”

Since I was currently unable to respond to anything right now, Ratoka replied for me. A tired-looking Earl Terejia quietly opened the door and came in for some reason together with Rashiok. It seems like Rashiok is gently nudging Earl Terejia. Maybe that’s why the Earl appears slightly confused.

“.....Is something, the matter. Earl Terejia.”

A terrible sounding voice came out of me. It seems that I’m still quite shaken. Earl Terejia turned towards me, and suddenly raised his eyebrow.

“.....No, I want to know what’s going on as well. Rashiok brought me over here.”

“Rashiok did?”

“That’s right.Something like this happened before as well. The day of that battle at Fort Jugfena.”

Rashiok, the subject of our discussion, was merely sitting in front of the door. Is this to make sure that nobody can leave? I think he wants us to talk things out. While the three of us remained confused, Rashiok suddenly howled.

We just kept looking at each other for a while. Finally, Earl Terejia was the first one to speak up.

“Shall we just chat for a little while in front of the door like this?”

Ratoka was licking his lips nervously. I also felt really awkward as well. We had just been talking about a topic which neither of us wanted a third party to hear.

“I think that what ‘Elise’ said earlier wasn’t wrong at all. Eliza, you have indeed been overlapping ‘Elise’ with Kamil.”

It’s impossible for me to insist on that not being the case anymore if even the Earl is saying so. I can only admit to it. I nodded bitterly, while the Earl continued speaking.

“I haven’t seen you too much these days recently, but I can still tell. You’re afraid of repeating the same thing with Kamil’s death all over again.”

– I felt like my vision had just cracked into two pieces like a shattered mirror. Something that I didn’t want to know, didn’t want to hear, even more so than that I was overlapping Ratoka and Kamil with each other, was being said by Earl Terejia.

“The same thing?”

“Aye. You couldn’t place your trust in someone, and as a result he died. And now, you’ve become afraid of trusting others. Isn’t that right, Eliza?”

As an old man, his gaze is quite sharp. However, there was no emotion expressed in his eyes. Not anger, not pity, nothing. I felt like all my strength left my body, and I collapsed onto the bed. I was afraid of meeting Ratoka’s eyes. I covered my eyes with one arm, and took deep breaths.

“.....Yes. That’s right.”

Once again, I have no choice other than to admit this as well.

“If even Claudia-dono didn’t notice anything, I didn’t think anyone else would. As expected, you know me very well, Earl Terejia.”

The earl didn’t reply to my words.

“Even so, I didn’t even know it myself until you told it to me so directly. I probably didn’t want to see or think about it myself.”

Even though I know it’s unseemly, my voice was trembling. On the contrary though, I think it would be funny if I could speak normally right now.

“.....What do you mean?”

My shoulder couldn't help but jump at Ratoka's sudden voice. I wasn't able to read his emotions from just his voice alone.

This time I smiled at myself in self-deprecation.

"I thought that it was meaningless to trust people, until Kamil died. Actually, it might be better to say that I was being unreasonable. At any rate, the earl meant the thing about me being unable to trust people."

Ratoka was looking directly at me. – In his eyes, I saw disdain.

"Just like the earl said, in the end Kamil died because I couldn't trust him. When we were confused by the baboon magical beast pretending to imitate a human voice, Kamil protected me and ended up dying.But if it hadn't been for me not trusting him, he probably wouldn't have ended up dying."

".....Then, are you now thinking about doing the opposite and relying on people more instead?"

"Ahh, that's right."

I nodded, while Ratoka closed his eyes. He's taking deep breaths. He's deeply furrowing his eyebrows, and I can see him clenching his fists tightly and attempting to suppress his emotions.

"-Is that so."

That was all he squeezed out of himself. It was such a cold voice. It made me feel like I was looking into a mirror, talking to a reflection of myself. His behavior where he's freezing his emotions and that icy voice, it strangely resembles me.

Suddenly Ratoka turned his back on me. Rashiok standing in front of the door stepped aside. Ratoka quietly left the room now that the path to the door was now clear. Earl Terejia who had remained silent while watching us let out a sigh.

"As always, being so difficult."

"....."

“At any rate, since I was obviously summoned here for something, I felt like I had to speak up and say something about how I saw things, forgive me.”

“.....No need to say sorry. Please excuse Rashiok for his actions.”

At any rate, if the earl hadn't spoken up, probably all three of us would have ended up leaving the room without saying anything. Maybe it would have come out of me someday if we had just continued waiting in silence, but neither the earl nor I have the free time for that.

After Earl Terejia left the room, only Rashiok and I remained. Rashiok approached me and laid down at my feet. His ears and tail were drooping, and he was looking at me with a gentle expression.

“.....I'm not angry at you, you know.”

Rashiok nudged my feet with his nose as I spoke those words lacking in any energy.

“Oi! I thought that you were supposed to help me if I told you everything I know!!”

The bandit in the interrogation room was crying and screaming. According to the soldiers, he had been shouting for all this time. It seems that at first he had tried to beat down the door, but since it was too painful to do so, now all he was doing was shouting.

“Did he say anything useful?”

I had asked Gunther and Claudia to take charge after I had him moved to the interrogation room. I was told by my soldiers that the moment he entered the interrogation room again, the bandit voluntarily started offering information on the bandit group's goal.

“.....It seems that they were going to meet up with a certain woman, in order to assist her.”

“A woman?”

“It seems that her name is Diferis. She's currently in the Ogren domain. It's a domain located in the heart of the Nordsturms' seat of power.”

CHAPTER 94

PROMISE WITH A DEMON

When I interrogated the bandit Valon based on what Claudia and Gunther had just told me, it didn't seem like he hid anything at all, there was nothing that seemed overly suspicious and he immediately told me anything I asked him.

He said that he came to Arxia to fulfill a mission given to him by his church.

He said that his mission was to meet with a woman named Diferis waiting in the Ogren domain, and to assist her.

He said that some people in the bandit group, himself included, believed in the West Alfena sect of the Revua church, and that the church that had given them their mission was the West Alfena church.

He said that the believers were nobles from the Densel Dukedom.

He said that the rest were real bandits, hired by the nobles.

He said that the woman named Diferis was making large amounts of generous donations to the West Alfena church.

He said that he was told to go through the Kaldia domain in order to reach the Ogren domain.



It's been about half a year since I caught the bandits, but this is the first time that I've heard all these things.

"What was Diferis going to have you guys do?"

"Well, I don't really know the details. I think it would probably be some anti-Arxian related activities."

Anti-Arxian activities, eh..... What I kept thinking about was of course, the suspicious movements of the Nordsturms, and those sisters that keep coming and going from their domain. Especially since those sisters are spreading anti-noble sentiments, they're a dangerous factor that could undermine order in Arxia.

I believe that Marquis Nordsturm's wife is from the Ogren domain. It would be natural to consider the Ogren domain complicit in their suspicious movements.

"Then, is the Western Alfena church intending to invade Arxia? Or perhaps destroy Arxia?"

"Of course, to destroy it. Since this is an infidel's country based on the Xia sect..... Well, that's what fanatics like my cellmate Remis believe in. I'm different. Well, my parents are believers, but I only joined the church for money. Since, I can make a profit. Just like Diferis, there are many both inside and outside of Densel that wish for Arxia's destruction and will give us a great deal of funding."

According to Valon, that's why he was willing to talk now since he was afraid of dying, as he wasn't a fanatic believer like the rest of them were.

It seems that the other man still in the dungeon is named Remis. Well, since he's going to be nothing but a frozen corpse soon, I no longer hold any interest in him.

But anyways, all of this got me thinking. If what Valon says is true, the Western Alfena church is basically a church in name only, and is actually more like some sort of anti-Arxian terrorist organization or group. What's more, it has many supporters.

"If that's the goal of your church, their supporters' goal must be very easy to understand."

".....Ahh, indeed. Other than the fanatics among them, it's mostly merchants that are donating money, as well as some nobles. There are some merchants that are aiming for control over regional products found in Arxia's vassal states, and there are also many weapon and drug dealers. Also, the nobles want to expand their territories."

Meaning, these people would benefit if war broke out. The merchants aim to profit from war, or to take control over some of Arxia's vassal states, so they're investing in a terrorist organization. Since their nobles want Arxia's land, it's also advantageous for them to invest in terrorists so that Arxia is already weakened before any actual war breaks out.

.....Also, nobles from my own country, the Nordsturms, might be involved in all this. It feels like some hot, passionate feelings are beginning to bubble up from within me, slowly coming to a boil.

“But, if your church is up to such large undertakings, I would have expected the name to be a little more famous.”

“The Western Alfena church is only a small sect, a tiny church. Since the original Revua religion that it’s under is so large, it’s like they’re hiding under an umbrella.”

.....Unlike the Xia religion in Arxia, the Revua religion has several major sects. However, since it’s structured so that there’s many small sects under each one, it’s indeed difficult to gather information on the smaller churches. None of the main churches should have a name containing either of the words “Western” or “Alfena.” It’s impossible to investigate. There’s too many small churches to possibly find out about them all. It’s especially difficult to learn about one if it’s so small in scale that it’s only known to locals.

While I was thinking in my mind without saying anything out loud, Valon also waited for me silently for a while. But while I was in the middle of my thoughts, I heard his voice again.

“Do all Arxian children have such disturbingly high intellect?”

“.....Well, who knows.”

“You don’t even look like you’re ten yet. If you had been born in Densel, it wouldn’t be strange at all if you were considered to be possessed by a demon and killed off.”

Well, if he had seen how I was when I had just been born in Arxia, he probably would have considered me a demon from an even earlier age. But anyways, he continued speaking.

I noticed that I couldn’t help but furrow my eyebrows again. The Xia religion doesn’t have the concept of demons, but in the Romur Ringwall languages used in the eastern countries, it’s a commonly used word there. Due to my memories from a previous life, it’s a word that’s easy for me to understand.

That's why I had a reaction. Thanks to the standards of my previous life's memories, I'd always considered the actions of the unscrupulous Kaldia family to be the "work of demons."

"Demon..... Eh."

Then I considered the words I was about to tell this man. They're definitely words that won't put the Kaldia family name to shame, the work of demons.

"I understand everything clearly now. I shall keep my promise with you."

"-Really!"

He seemed delighted at the news, while I smiled slightly at him in return.

"Yes, of course."

I stood up. At the same time, I had the two soldiers to the left and right of Valon restrain his arms, and force him down from his chair and kneel in front of me. I took a slender sword from Gunther who was behind me, and held its tip to Valon's throat.

".....Eh?"

His smile froze. That was his final word. My slender sword sliced above his clavicles, right through the soft fleshy part of his throat and exited close to his cervical vertebrae. Immediately after, reddish-brown blood started flowing from his mouth, and covered the floor.

"I forgot to tell you, but you're already dead now. Meaning, only dead people are going to leave my dungeon."

His eyelids were blinking furiously and he kept sputtering blood, while his lips moved like he wanted to say something. No voice came out, but his lips were moving so tremendously that I felt as if he was being driven by demons.

Well, things are like this already. Eliza Kaldia was cursed from the moment she was born into this world.

I had never intended in the first place to ever release any of the bandits. They hurt my people and committed crimes. It's only natural that they should die in compensation.

CHAPTER 95

DESPITE MY GRIEF, I WAS UNABLE TO TAKE THAT HAND

“Eliza-sama, it’s time for dinner.”

The voice surprised me. During this afternoon, I was staying in my room, working on finishing all the paperwork, but I seem to have gotten too absorbed in working. When I raised my head, I felt a dull sensation on my back and neck. It seems that I’ve been working for too long without rest. Since there’s a lack of sunlight during winter, I’m always using candles, and I noticed that it had almost burned all the way down.

“Ahh – thank you very much, Mrs. Hortensia.”

My new nanny, Mrs. Hortensia, was the person standing in front of the door who had called me. It seems that she came all the way to my room to call me as I wasn’t coming out. It was already completely dark outside, and she had a lamp in her hand. The lamplight was flickering, reflecting off of her eyes.

“I’ll get going right now.”

After carefully putting my quill pen back in its pen stand so that the ink wouldn’t run or spill, I stood up. Mrs. Hortensia entered my room, and she began helping me put on my robe to replace my coat. While the inside of my room is kept warm by a hearth which had a heating system that could send warm air to my room through a central fireplace, the corridors didn’t have that system.

“.....Eliza-sama.”

Just as Mrs. Hortensia helped me button up the last button of my robe, she suddenly started speaking to me. She had a relaxed smile, and was looking at me with a gentle look in her eyes.

“Eliza-sama is a splendid person. You work your hardest to try and fulfill your duties as a domain lord.”

She took my hand and wrapped both her hands around mine. She still smiled softly at me when she saw my surprise, and she began talking slowly as if trying to persuade me.

“But, before any of that, Eliza-sama is still a child. Even though you have the position of an adult, you shouldn’t treat yourself as if you were an adult.”

She was basically treating me just like a child.

“.....I can’t do that.”

My thoughts were bitter as I muttered that out loud. Mrs. Hortensia’s words were warm and soft, just like a spring breeze. They suddenly invaded my dry, cracked heart.

That was why, it was so bitter. It was scary. I felt like I wanted to get rid of this feeling that I wasn’t used to.

A piece of firewood from my fireplace snapped with a loud crackle. However, Mrs. Hortensia never looked away from me at all, almost as if she didn’t hear it.

“No. You must realize that you are still a child, and treat yourself accordingly.”

She was so direct with me. Even though her gaze seemed gentle, it was also strong. This was scary.

“Eliza-sama. It is true that when Earl Terejia hired me, he did instruct me to treat you as an adult. However, you are still a child. I am certain that because nobody treats Eliza-sama as a child, that is why you are always so busy having to think about difficult things.”

“.....Stop, please.”

I could hear myself clenching my teeth.

It was as if there was a voice screaming in the back of my head to not listen to her, to not let her say anything more. It was difficult to breathe. I felt as if I was being choked by something soft like cotton.

“In this mansion, it’s an unfortunate thing that there’s nobody here who knows how to raise children. That’s why nobody knows how to just let Eliza-sama have fun and relax. Anyone that used to treat Eliza-sama as a child is no longer here.”

Mrs. Hortensia’s tone of voice was invading me with such warmth and affection that it was breaking me into pieces. This time she took her hands that were wrapped around mine, and placed them on my shoulders.

This was no good. I couldn’t let this go on any further. The innermost part of my mind was screaming at me.

I wanted to escape from here. Despite thinking so, I couldn’t move at all. Her arms enveloped me while I stood so still as if I had grown roots. It was as if her hands were made to mend broken objects.

“At your age, you should still have the right to be acting spoiled to others.”

The words she whispered in my ears were like honey to me, giving my mind a sweet numbness. Just like warm milk, she had a sweet, gentle smell. My skin had been missing the warm sensation of human touch.

I just let my muscles relax and leaned against her without using any strength at all.

I considered myself as being strong-armed into this. This was an irresistible warmth. It was completely different worlds, inside and outside of her embrace.

My eyes felt a little hot. The back of my throat hurt as well – it was hot and painful.

“.....Eliza-sama? Are you crying?”

I was breaking down. At the same time that lukewarm water accumulated in my eyes and started spilling over, Mrs. Hortensia’s hands rubbed my back.

“–Please stop.”

Even so, I still couldn’t allow myself to just keep sobbing shamefully like this.

“Please let go of me, Mrs. Hortensia.”

At the same time as I said that, I pushed against her shoulders with my hands. Her look was one of slight surprise, then it changed to what I understood as pity.

My heart was pounding. The feeling in my chest was so intense like it would burst at any moment.

I covered my eyes with my sleeves, and stumbled backwards. Mrs. Hortensia didn't try to hold on to me. When I lightly sat down with my back against my desk, I finally felt a strange sense of relief.

".....Please go ahead to the dining hall. I'll come along shortly."

I heard Mrs. Hortensia sighing gently.

"I shall do as you say. But, please, never forget what I just said."

With that final comment, she left only the sound of her footsteps behind. All strength left my body and I collapsed where I was sitting.

My hands were trembling. I was shivering in fear at something other than that sweet temptation.

Just why did I reject Mrs. Hortensia's words just now, I wonder.

These contradictory feelings of mine made me want to cry again, and I kept desperately grinding my teeth. Still, in the back of my head, I kept telling myself that it was just fine like this.

CHAPTER 96

RUNNING AWAY TO MY NEIGHBORS

“Eliza-sama, feed those horses over there as well, will you?”

“Got it, I’m on it.”

Children about my age are running about, pouring horse fodder into buckets. I had also joined these children, having added a large amount of horse fodder into a bucket I was now carrying, heading for the group of horses they indicated to me.

The bucket is heavy, and the horses move about freely, so if I don’t act fast I won’t know which horses are the ones I’m supposed to feed. Although it’s winter, this is still work that will make you sweat. However, quite unexpectedly, this is quite enjoyable, even fun.

“My lord, are you okay?”

“Yes, of course.”

As I nodded to Teo who came to see how I was doing, I must have really looked just like a child to him. With a wry smile, he left without saying anything else.



Ratoka, Earl Terejia, and Mrs. Hortensia had each in succession shaken me badly inside, so now internally I was a mess, as if a storm had just passed through me.

Although it’s a little pathetic to tell anyone, but truth be told, I can’t take any more mental shakeups right now. Especially if someone else is like Mrs. Hortensia, and tries to treat me simply as a child, I’m terribly afraid that something within me will collapse and break down.

Right now I’m feeling afraid of everyone living at the Mansion of Golden Hills. This phobia of trusting others has made even me realize that I’m currently a little mentally unstable. I’m also a little surprised at this little bit of immaturity inside of me.

That's why – I decided to escape from there. Or in other words, I became a runaway of sorts.

I absolutely can't bring myself to ignore my work. That's why, I only ran away to my neighbors' tents, the new citizens that are currently passing their first winter on the nearby hills. In the morning I'll still return to the mansion to do my work, but I only sort out and work on the documents with highest priority and importance, and leave promptly at noon. I'm actually only half a runaway.

Originally during winter, my time during afternoons wasn't spent on work anyways, it was my time to practice martial arts and train with the army, so it's no problem to only work this much every day. After I'm done training at the barracks each day, I don't return to my room at the mansion, and come back to the tents instead.

Of course, I'm just escaping reality. I realize this quite fully.

But even so, if the environment around me changes, some other things will change as well. It greatly reduces the chances of meeting someone I don't want to deal with, such as Mrs. Hortensia and Ratoka. Hopefully this gives me a chance for my emotions to settle down. Well, time should solve all problems, including ones such as my age and my feelings.

"Eliza-sama, have you finished over there?"

When I somehow managed to finish feeding all of the horses that I was tasked with feeding, a girl about my age called out to me.

It's been almost two weeks since I started living with the Shiru tribe. I've been staying at the tent with only children, the same one as when I made my inspection before.

"Ahh, it's done."

"Then that's all for today. Let's go get something to eat together."

She grinned and held on to my hand, as we returned to our tent. When I first came here, I kept getting lost among all the tents that looked the same to me, so now the kids here have acquired a habit of having someone lead me by my hand through the tents so that I don't get lost.

“Here, wipe yourself with this towel. If you’re all sweaty you’ll catch a cold, so make sure to wipe properly, okay?”

“I know. I’ll be alright.”

The children in the tent basically treat me as a “newcomer.” The children find it amusing to help take care of me as I’m not used to life among the Shiru tribe.

The older children aside, even the younger children behave as if they’re my older brothers and sisters, it’s quite interesting. It’s quite a fresh feeling to be taken care of for once, instead of having to take charge of others.

With no worries, no cares, I really have this feeling of relief.

I’m wearing some clothing typical of the Shiru tribe that was handed down to me. Usually tunics and dalmatics are the clothing most typical of the Jugfena region, and although there’s not much difference in the tailoring, the embroidery has much brighter colors than our region, and there are many animal motifs such as birds and horses rather than plants.

I carefully wiped my entire body. Without her needing to tell me, wiping down sweat properly had been drilled into my bones during my first three months of training at the barracks. While their clothes are a bit different and possibly made from different materials than the clothes I’m used to, I’m already getting used to them.

“Hey hey, what are you going to do today, Eliza-sama?”

“Today..... I have to go train with the army.”

When the sun passes the midday point, Gunther should be arriving soon at the entrance to this simple makeshift village to fetch me.

“Ahh. So much work. Hang in there.”

I nodded at her encouragement, and crawled out of the tent. I was instantly attacked by the cold, biting air. Thanks to heat from a nearby fire, the cold didn’t pierce down to my bones, but it was still cold.

When I covered my nose with my hand as it was hurting from the cold and watching my foggy breath in the air, the girl followed me out of the tent and put a long piece of cloth around my neck. Is this a scarf? Arxia doesn't use this type of clothing.

"Wrap this around your neck properly. It's a serious matter if you get a cold."

"Ahh, s..... My bad."

Sorry, is what I would have usually said, then I remembered that I was with children and changed my phrasing. To them, they only know simple ways to apologize. The first time I said "my apologies" to them, they all tilted their heads at me quizzically.

"You should only say my bad if you really catch a cold. At times like these, you should say thank you."

The girl seemed so proud of herself as she said so, and I laughed slightly. Since when had I forgotten how to do such simple things, I wonder? Just like she said, it's certainly a strange thing to receive a scarf and apologize for it.

"Thank you."

"Mm, such a good child."

The girl grinned widely and caressed my head. I was finally infected by her as well, finding all of this funny, and a smile appeared on my face.

CHAPTER 97

SNOW CRYSTALS, PART 1

And, anyone up for donating some steam games to me off my wish list for the winter holidays? They're all on sale! Let me know on steam if so, my name there is the same, imperfectluck, same picture of Estelle the orange haired girl as well!

Outside the window, snow is beginning to fall. Although I'm almost done with today's work, the timing is still bad.

I removed the item I was using as a reading stone to hold documents in place, and thought about the work I still had to do while examining the lump of glass in my hand. Beautiful glass like this with few impurities is a luxury item, much more valuable than something like window glass, that's when I suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

"Eliza-sama, what's the matter?"

"Ah..... Nothing. Nothing's the matter, Mrs. Marshan."

I responded to her and nonchalantly placed the reading stone into my sleeve like nothing had happened. Luckily for me, she didn't notice anything.

As always, it's still Mrs. Marshan's job to teach me about my political work. Since there's still much that I haven't learned yet, it's a reassuring thing to know that I can always call for her at any time I need to. She's a talented teacher who has Earl Terejia's recognition, she's skilled in a wide range of different fields, and she has a sharp mind that always has a fast and accurate response for any questions I ask her.

While she did tilt her head quizzically at me when I was busy affixing myself on my reading stone, but she didn't pay it much mind, and returned her attention to the papers she was working on. It seems like she was reading essays written by both Elises. Mrs. Marshan is also in charge of educating all children at the Mansion of Golden Hills.

I returned my line of sight to my own work. I still have a few remaining reports and applications from my army to go over, and I need to rewrite and simplify the most

important documents as well as sign them. Also, in tandem with that, I need to write up purchase orders for what the military needs, and sign those as well.

After all that I need to organize them and submit the documents to Earl Terejia. If there's no problems, the contents of the documents will be carried out. I punched a hole through each documents and strung them together, finally finishing my desk work for today.

"Are you finished?"

Mrs. Marshan relaxedly pulled up the hem of her dress as she came over. Up until now, she's never even once worn the dalmatics and tunics common to the Jugfena region. She always wore a simple, plain one-color dress with a proper collar.

"Yes, there's no problems. How about on your end?"

"I'm finished as well."

While Mrs. Marshan smiled elegantly, suddenly her expression clouded over as she looked at the papers in her hand. One of the two Elises, or maybe both of them, may have bad grades, I wonder.

"Um..... How are the other children you're in charge of teaching doing? Are they properly learning under your guidance?"

"Eh? Uhh..... They're mostly fine."

Maybe it was a little too unexpected for her to hear me asking this question, she seemed to nod absentmindedly at me. However, she continued to remain out of character as she spoke again.

"However, it seems like recently one of them hasn't been taking what I say to heart..... Although that one is still working hard, it seems like as if there are other distractions going on."

"Distractions....."

I recalled Ratoka's face from when we confronted each other on that day. A surprised expression, a worried expression, a bitter expression, a dark expression filled with

anger..... In just a short moment, so many different expressions were expressed across his face.

I wonder if Ratoka was as emotionally fragile as I was right now, if he had been hurt by that day as much as I was.

“As for Elise the viscount’s daughter, it seems that she’s been having seizures quite often lately, and her condition is poor. As for Elise the apprentice, maybe she’s been worrying about her.”

“.....I’ve heard about this as well.”

This is also a story that hurts to hear. Even though I had told Ratoka that I would go and visit Elise, all I’ve done instead is run away from the mansion.

Even though Mrs. Marshan almost certainly doesn’t know about the argument between me and Ratoka, it seems like she’s detected something from my eyes. But in the end, I couldn’t say anything, and lowered my eyes to avoid her gaze.

She probably wants to say let’s do something about it. If not that, she probably wants to ask what happened. But, she didn’t approach the topic at all.

Mrs. Marshan is my governess. Among all the servants, only the governess will end up leaving for another household once her work here is finished. That’s why she never tries to have anything to do with any problem that residents of the Mansion of Golden Hills may encounter. The more people that are living here, the more obvious this has become.

That’s why I deeply feel the irony of how I feel the safest next to her out of all the residents here.

“W, welcome back, Eliza-sama!!”

“I’m back.”

On days that I don’t have to participate in military training, I’ll return to the new citizens’ makeshift tent village to have lunch, and do the work that’s given to me here, before returning again to the mansion for martial arts training.

“Eliza-sama, don’t you get tired from work?”

“It’s started to snow, aren’t you cold?”

“She’s gotten wet from the snow! Take her to warm up by the stove!”

As I entered the tent, I was suddenly surrounded by children. While still busy chattering, one of them took me by my hand and led me to the stove in the center of the tent.

“Ahh, I’m fine. I rode Rashiok here today.”

“Rashiok, he’s Eliza’s friend, the scaled flying wolf dragunia, right?”

At Rashiok’s name, the children suddenly all got into a commotion. I did talk a little about Rashiok before with them, it seems that they remember.

“Yes. In Arxia, we call him a wolf dragon, or a draconis.”

“Is he still here?”

“Yes, he’s still here. He’s waiting outside the tent.”

Apparently the children seemed to be interested in the wolf dragon, and they cheered as I pointed to the tent’s entrance.

“I want to see it!”

“Exactly what I was thinking. It’s cold outside, can we have him come in?”

“Yeah yeah!”

Their eyes that were shining with curiosity, as well as their bright smiles made my chest feel slightly fuzzy and warm. How direct they can be is so dazzling, as well as enviable.

It’s a way of thinking that I can’t have for myself. Even Ratoka who had a twisted childhood growing up, or the sickly Elise, seem so far away to me, sparkling in the distance.

Claudia’s image overlapped with their appearance. She’s a girl that’s so direct in everything that it’s almost unbelievable she’s also a noble girl.

Then, I finally realized it. When Claudia first came to my domain, I didn't know how to deal with her. At first, I was always exhausted because of the way she acted.

In retrospect, that might have simply been me feeling a twisted kind of envy. I can never be like these children, or be like Claudia.

I truly believe that it was a good thing for me, leaving the mansion.

I envy them. However, I'm not like them, and now I can honestly admit to myself that I can't become like them.

Knowing myself clearly, this is definitely a requirement for me to be able to solve my own twistedness.

CHAPTER 98

SNOW CRYSTALS, PART 2

I called Rashiok into the tent, and the children were all agog in amazement, but also excited as they surrounded him.

“-Wow!”

“It’s okay, he’s just like a horse or a sheep, he’s docile as long as you don’t do anything bad to him.”

I smiled wryly at the overwhelming excitement coming from the children at seeing a real live draconis for the first time, while I stayed by Rashiok’s side and stroked his nose. This is also the first time that Rashiok’s ever been surrounded by such a large number of children like this, but he just took it all in stride although he seemed a bit confused.

“Eliza-sama, is it alright to touch him?”

“Since Rashiok has scales instead of fur, you have to pet him gently.”

“O, ok.”

Several of the older children, gingerly began to start touching Rashiok gently in turn. They made sure to be extra careful.

“Wow, his scales are glistening.”

“This is completely different from a horse!”

Maybe they all now believe that Rashiok isn’t any danger to them, the other children began to reach their hands out to pet Rashiok as well. Since they’ve been dealing with livestock ever since they were born, it only took them a little while to get used to Rashiok. The older children have already petted Rashiok without incident, so the rest of them relaxed unconsciously as well.

After that, they observed Rashiok even more closely with great interest, and some of them seemed to really enjoy the feeling of stroking Rashiok's scales, while some of them stood off to the side after looking, with an expression of great satisfaction on their faces.

I tightly grasped the reading stone in my pocket, and called out to some of the children who had finished with their interest in Rashiok.

"Hey, do you guys know what shape snow is?"

"Eh? Snow's shape?"

I couldn't help but feel a little excited inside when I saw all of them having blank looks on their faces. All of them confirmed to me that they didn't know the answer. Some of them asked if it was similar to grains of earth.

"So you haven't seen it, eh."

"But how do you look at it? They're too small, and look like grains."

"I brought a secret tool with me today."

And after saying so, I brought my hand out and opened my fingers. Calling it something like a secret tool, I tried my best to contain the laughter I was feeling inside, and I could feel my cheek muscles twitching as I held it in.

"What is this? Wow. It looks like ice."

"That's not it. Doesn't this look like glass?"

"Hey, for some reason Eliza-sama's hand seems a little weird."

"Yeah. It looks bigger than usual..... Ah, maybe this is what you can see snow with?"

As I nodded to the child who seemed to understand what this was for, the children's eyes began to sparkle with the light of curiosity.

"I want to see snow!"

"Yeah, I want to see as well. Shall we go outside?"

The children all nodded to each other, and each of them began to tightly wrap their scarves around themselves. I thought that this might take them a while, but some of the girls that really enjoyed helping others had everyone's scarves wound up around them in the blink of an eye.

After they prepared themselves against the cold and everyone exited the tent, even though it shouldn't be that late yet, the sky had already gotten quite dark and covered in snow clouds. Although it's slightly dim, the snow piled up on the ground seems bright in comparison.

This time, the children all surrounded me. I laughed a little as I remembered the way they had just surrounded Rashiok earlier, and I held out my hands to accept some snowflakes onto my mittens.

Then, on top of the snowflakes on my mittens, I placed my reading stone. Well then, is the crystallization of snow in this world a hexagonal flower shape just like my original world, I wonder?

Looking into the lump of glass on my hand, I saw a beautiful hexagonal flower, just like how I imagined.

"I can see it!"

As I held my hand out to the children, they looked at it with great interest, then suddenly there was a huge uptick in their excitement levels.

"Wow! It's pretty!"

"What is this?"

As the children raised their voices and made a commotion, I could see some adults peeking out of the tents nearby in confusion.

"Well, snow is incredible. It looks like a flower."

There was an expression of wonder on her face another girl commented, and I felt joy in my heart as well. As I expected, it looked like a flower.

"Let me see, let me see!Oh, it's true. Is this what snow is shaped like? Amazing."

A man who was watching from another tent came over and looked into the reading stone, and agreed with the earlier girl's comment as he patted her head and praised her. Ahh, that's right. Patting someone's head while praising them will make them feel better.

I remembered back to when I was having Ratoka work for me, we never even touched each other. Children should be praised more often and receive more affection, I realize my mistake now. As he patted some other children on the head as well, he put his hand down and looked at me in a bit of confusion on what to do. He seemed like he was hesitating on what to say, but then he returned his line of sight to the other children.

".....Don't catch a cold out here now."

And with a gentle chuckle, he returned to his tent. While I silently watched him leave, someone suddenly patted my head from behind.

"Eliza-sama, you're incredible."

And with that, it was like a floodgate was opened and all the children came rushing over to pat me on the head as well. I'm being pushed around on all sides, I feel like a piece of food they're fighting over.

"Hey, it's about time to eat!"

When one of the children who had stayed with Rashiok called out to us, the children filled the entire area with cheers. Like always, someone was holding my hand and guiding me, but today there's so many kids around me that I can't even tell who's holding on to me. They're everywhere around me, and their warmth is much stronger than that of my mittens.

"-Ah. Everyone being together, it's so warm."

Someone noticed this fact and said it out loud, and it was decided from then on that the children would move together in great clumps like this from now on.

CHAPTER 99

EXILED PRINCE

Life was peaceful as I spent time with the Shiru tribe children. It's said that only during times like these when one's heart is tranquil that one can explore their true inner self.

Spending all this time with children my own age, I can now objectively observe my own strangeness. No, maybe I should say instead that I was forced to deal with my own immaturity and anxiety, even if I didn't want to.

I'll admit it to myself. My spirit is still immature. As the days passed by, I felt like I was actually more immature than the Shiru tribe children. I was born as and have been living as Eliza to my current age of eight years old without having matured at all over this time. This may be because of the memories I've inherited about my past life by some sort of mistake, making me into a fake adult.

Definitely, my sense of reasoning came with my memories. It's a fact that I used my memories to establish my own personality, since Eliza's original personality hadn't been established yet.

However, these are still just memories that another girl experienced before, it doesn't feel like a personal experience. I'm going to separate myself from her will and her emotions. If I don't do this, there's no way that my spirit will grow and mature.

And so within my ugly, twisted inner self, confusion was scattering about inside me.

Ratoka treats me as an adult and his guardian. Earl Terejia gives me all the responsibilities of an adult. My heart remains too immature as of yet to respond to them.

Also, there's Mrs. Hortensia who tries to treat me like a child. If I take her gently offered hand, I would feel like I'd be shirking all my responsibilities. It would mean that I'd stop relying on my own strength alone. I definitely won't forgive myself for my own sins.

For someone who doesn't even know herself, how can I accurately place trust in others? Whether it's running away from the painful memory of Kamil's death, or

placing a false sense of trust in my previous memories, all of this is simply me acting shamefully.

For me to have only realized all of this now, just how foolish can I be.

It's thanks to these children that I can now laugh at and recognize my own foolishness. They know that I'm the domain lord. However, they also know that I'm still a child as well, and gently remind me of that fact.

.....Well, while I'm accepting all of this, it's still taking some time for all of my emotions to sort themselves out.



I stayed with those children on that snow-covered hill for two full months. Finally the skies are beginning to clear up, and winter should be ending soon. This year is almost over.

During a rare break when the weather was completely clear, a messenger pigeon came from the royal capital.

"It's an announcement from the royal family."

Earl Terejia's face was drained of all its color and his hands were shaking as he handed the message to me. It was indeed stamped with the royal emblem.

I haven't seen Earl Terejia or experienced such a painfully heavy atmosphere since the last time we were all together in Ratoka's room, and I adjusted my shirt's collar, trying to forget about that time.

"What did the king say in it?"

When I inquired about the message, Earl Terejia found it unusually difficult to speak. Normally his eyes filled with wisdom and suspicion would be peering over the contents of the letter. Almost as if he wanted to make absolutely sure of what was written there and to check its veracity.

He kept me waiting for quite a while, but he finally answered in a much quieter voice than usual.

“.....It’s been decided that Prince Albert’s going to enter a monastery.”

.....Huh?

The sound of creaky furniture seemed to fill the entirety of Earl Terejia’s office. I only started noticing the sound after what seemed like an endless amount of deafening silence.

“Unbelievable, could that really be?”

I couldn’t help but speak what the Earl was probably thinking already. It’s only natural. All I could think about was how unbelievable this was.

“Does this mean that Prince Albert’s being exiled from the royal family?”

“.....That is indeed what it means if he becomes a monk.”

Ridiculous. How could such a ridiculous thing happen? And why now of all times. Just losing the position of crown prince was already incitement enough for Planates before, and now this happens.

And on top of all that, just why is he getting exiled from the royal family. Such a thing, it’s almost as if –

“Could the royal family and the Ar Xia Church be hoping for a war?”

When I muttered those words out in a daze, Earl Terejia’s eyebrow immediately arched upwards.

“Be careful what you say.”

I realized what I had just said, and I apologized for my misconduct. Even if it’s Earl Terejia, there are things I can’t say.

Ever since the time of the Arxia Kingdom’s previous incarnation, the Sacred Holy Lawful Kingdom of Arxia, the Arxia Kingdom’s power has only been used to protect followers of the Xia religion. War only means defensive wars. Even threatening or provoking other countries, and declaring war, our kingdom finds this unacceptable.

“Well, I meant to say that this will probably become a situation. By making Prince Albert completely ineligible to inherit the throne, this is dangerously pushing Planates, or I should say the Rindarl Union, into becoming even more hostile.”

The voice that ended coming out of my own throat sounded terribly cold.

Well, it's only to be expected. If Planates becomes an enemy country as well, as part of the eastern border defense line, Kaldia would be greatly affected.

If war breaks out, I hardly have enough soldiers I can mobilize. I'd have to conscript the citizens into the army and onto the battlefield. It's hard for the Kaldia army who's already low on troops to recruit enough soldiers, so conscription is the only method.

Are my citizens going to have to fight? For such unclear reasons? Am I going to have to force them onto the battlefield, even though I had decided to compensate for my family's sins to them?

“Calm down. Those in the royal court will probably be able to persuade the king. As one would expect, since nobles are in charge of their citizens, this is something they cannot ignore. Just like you.”

Thanks to the earl's coaxing, I was able to calm down, at least on the surface. I just nodded back to him reflexively.

.....However, inside me dissatisfaction and anxiety were swirling about like a tornado.

CHAPTER 100

STARS YET UNSEEN (SIDE STORY)

The oldest memory I could recall, was traveling in a desert somewhere. Behind my father's cart, I was being held in my mother's chest as the golden ground and the blue sky traveled past me so quickly.



"Alright, Kamil. Come with your mother."

As soon as we returned to her home country of Arxia, mother made me join the temple. I thought that I would always be walking behind her, but why did it turn out like this.....

In the unfamiliar chalk buildings, my mother who walked around with a lordly manner, seemed like a stranger to me.

"Welcome back, Iris-sama."

The women here were clad in pure white as if for a funeral, and they all bowed their heads towards mother as she passed by, I thought it was strange.

"Mother, where's this?"

I couldn't help but become anxious, and I tugged on mother's sleeves as she walked in front of me. I've begun to grow much faster recently, and I was almost as tall as my mother already who was short among women.

"What is it, Kamil?"

The voice that responded to me, had no warmth to it at all, I wondered if this really was mother's voice after all.

"Um..... Where are we?"

“This is Shanak Temple. The origin of the gods..... The god Misorua’s castle. My home..... And from today onwards, yours as well.”

Mother’s words came out like she was singing, and I couldn’t even understand half of them. This is going to be my home? But the stories I had heard from father about his home while we were traveling, hadn’t mentioned anything about temples at all.

Father had saved money since he was young, and he was finally able to construct a large mansion. I had heard about energetic servants that would work happily for him. There’s no way that he could have been talking about those lifeless seeming women I passed by just earlier.

“.....Where’s father?”

And why is it that, father didn’t come back together with us? Last time I saw father, he had been on his way to a trade where he was selling the other party goods for a grand dinner. We should have been sleeping on the carts tonight like usual, and returned home tomorrow together.

“.....”

Without even the slightest sign of a smile on her face, my mother ignored my question. At this time, I was extremely confused. My mother in front of me seemed like a completely different person, and the pure white building surrounding me without even a single window felt like it was suffocating me.

I know absolutely nothing. Even though that had been the norm during our travels, why is it making me so uneasy now.

“That man who had no holy power, had no right to ever step foot in this sacred temple.”

“Eh.....?”

I don’t, quite understand. That man, could she possibly mean father? With the current conversation, it didn’t seem like she could be talking about someone else, but I can’t believe that mother would refer to father like that.

“.....Kamil. You’re my son. Your power shall be devoted to Misorua.”



I had been born while my merchant father was traveling around various countries. Father had taught me how to be a merchant, and before I realized it, I had always thought that would be my course in life.

Mother had taught various skills and knowledge to me as well, and once again, before I realized it, learning became natural to me as well.

“Now, Kamil. Do as I teach you.”

Mother whispered something in my ear as she indicated at the pale white neck of a woman. The woman who was tied up in mother’s restraints, wasn’t even able to cry out in fear and her face was ash white.

Mother placed her hand on my shoulder. I emptied my mind as much as I possibly could, and swung down the short sword in my right hand without any excess movements.

Without wavering, the sword cut off the woman’s head. Since I knew that if I pulled on the sword that blood would splash, I let go of the sword just like that.

“Wonderful. As expected of my child.”

– Amazing, well done. As expected of my son.

Mother’s laughter as she seemed so happy, overlapped with my memory of father’s voice. I felt like fatigue was piling up on me, and I shook off mother’s hand on my shoulder. Recently, I feel like it’s annoying whenever she tries to talk to me, and I have nothing I even want to say to my mother.

“Misorua will surely be pleased as well.”

I know nothing about stuff like that. Unlike my mother, in my mind I spat on it.



“If you would like to leave this place, won’t you come with me?”

I felt extremely lazy. Because it was too annoying to turn my head, even though it was rude I only looked in his direction. Even though he was old, his posture indicated that he was vigorous in his old age. I could instantly tell at a glance that he was different from all the lifeless people in the temple. I had been exceedingly bored until this man suddenly arrived, and now some curiosity has finally returned to me.

“.....Oi you, who are you?”

Since the man hadn’t introduced himself, I eventually asked him.

“My name is Sigmund Teresia. I’m a noble.”

“Ah..... a noble, eh. As expected.”

To my confident statement, he lifted his eyebrows quizzically. As a noble, maybe he’s protesting my complete lack of manners.

Right now, I don’t care about anything. Even if I’m not being courteous to him, please, go ahead and have me flogged or execute me or do whatever you like, is what I thought.

One month ago, I killed my mother.

I had gotten so tired of her existence. Unbelievably, I’d managed to poison her food with the poisons she had taught to me. But I didn’t really think that I’d succeed. I guess mother had never expected that her own son would use her own techniques to kill her.

And two months ago, father had died.

One year ago mother had taken me and left father because father had fallen down so far that it was too miserable to look at. As a major merchant who had done whatever he liked, hanging out with rotten nobles and traveling to other countries, his life had become quite depraved.

But in the end, I heard that he was executed for poisoning some nobles somewhere.

Poisoning, eh. Even using the same method, I am indeed my father's son after all. My mother had changed so much, that I had my suspicions.

"I'll say it again. If you would like to leave this place, come with me."

The old man informed me in an adamant voice. I had taken a minute to look back on the events of this past year. Living here every day in this chalk white temple with no warmth and no beauty, had sapped my spirit. Just like my mother who was from here.

Compared to those lifeless shrine maidens that I had thought were so strange when I first arrived, there was almost no difference between them and me now who might as well be a dead person.

If I remain here, I'll probably die just like this. Probably, just like my parents. That was all I was certain of.

".....Got it. I'll go with you."

That was my answer, and he nodded firmly.

CHAPTER 101

REMNANTS OF THE ARTOLAS KINGDOM

Today's lunch was pancakes, pumpkin stew, and goat yogurt.

Arxia's never had fermented dairy products before. The first time I ate them here I felt like I was eating something extremely "valuable," but I got used to them after eating them every other day here. Rye is ground into flour and provides batter for the pancakes, and they have a rather plain taste to them. I'm really fond of all this food because none of this type of cuisine can be found in Arxia. If only sugar could be added to this pumpkin stew as well, I'm sure it would gain a delectable sweetness.

During the hustle and bustle of lunchtime, the children around me got to chatting about the schedule for this afternoon.

"Hey hey, did you know that some of our parents are going over to teach the army how to take care of their horses today?"

"Ehh, even I know how to take care of horses!"

"According to Eliza-sama, people in Kaldia don't raise horses very often. Just like the farmers' children."

The farmers' children that they're referring to, are the orphaned children left behind by the refugees. Since the farmers' children have far different lifestyles and work habits from the nomad children, they live in separate tents, as under the current simple tent system that everyone here lives in, it's impossible for them to live together. While the thought that the farmers' children would probably need to know about horses for their lifestyles popped into my mind, the Shiru children all nodded in agreement with each other.

Well, anyways.

"It's not the same at all. The Kaldia army is King Eliza's warriors."

Hearing this, one of the children sitting right behind me sharply raised his voice.

“Those who can’t even become warriors are of a lower class, don’t group them together!”

“Really, are you still going on about that, Athrun?”

The other children all seemed to be tired about whatever this topic was and fell silent as the kid glared around at everyone.

The kid named Athrun was a sullen boy with blue hair who was now looking downwards with a surly expression. While there’s a fleck of shadow in his eyes, there’s still an intense will emanating from his silver-blue irises. He’s one of those that usually doesn’t hang out with me, so I didn’t recognize him. I see, so his name is Athrun.

“By the way, although Athrun’s mother is from the Shiru tribe’s Jugar clan, his father was a farmer.”

The girl sitting next to me explained this to me in a small voice, probably because she noticed my attention was on Athrun. She snuck a surreptitious look at Athrun, then continued whispering to me hesitantly.

“When we started fighting with Densel, Athrun’s father had wanted to become a Jugar clan warrior. But, we only allow those of Shiru heritage to become warriors. So in the end, his father wasn’t allowed to participate in battle, and both his parents were killed by Densel at the refugee camp.....”

“.....I see.”

Well, I definitely think he has quite a sad backstory.

Among the Shiru tribe, there are clear distinctions made between warriors and non-warriors. Those that are made into warriors are given 2 horses each from the Shiru tribe’s common property, and they also receive training in the spear and bow ever since childhood. Although the requirements to become a warrior differ slightly from clan to clan within the Shiru tribe, one thing they all have in common is that they only allow boys from the Shiru tribe to become warriors.

The Jugar clan is a patriarchal clan. Since Athrun’s father wasn’t of Shiru heritage, he wouldn’t be able to become a Shiru warrior no matter how much he wanted to become one.

Now I understand the basics of Athrun's situation, but there's still one thing I'm worried about. The girl who had just told me about Athrun was about to return to eating her meal, but I interrupted her to ask a question.

".....He said 'lower class' earlier, what exactly does that mean?"

From the flow of the conversation – I guessed that it probably had to do with outsiders to the Shiru tribe, the farmers. However, I don't feel that there's such a large gap between the nomads and the farmers to make such a distinction.

In fact, since they're going to move to Kaldia and live here from now on, the Shiru tribe is going to have to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and take up an agricultural one. They don't have the luxury of discriminating based on backgrounds against the farmers.

"Ahh..... Um. In the past, the Shiru tribe's warriors were always considered the 'King's Spears,' the protectors of their chosen king, so it's more glory and honor than the farmers, that's what it is, I think."

Although it seemed like the girl herself didn't really understand her own explanation too well, I understood her explanation about "lower class" very clearly.

The "King's Spears" is a term from the former Artolas Kingdom, they represent the nobles, or ruling class of Artolan society. Meaning, social statuses have carried over from Artolas even after its destruction by Densel.

I put down my bowl of pumpkin soup and stood up. From the edge of my vision, I saw the girl who was just talking to me blink in surprise. I didn't pay her any mind, and I walked up to Athrun.

Since I had suddenly stood up all by myself, of course all the other children gathered their attention on me. Since Athrun was still looking down at the ground, he was the only one that didn't notice me, until I walked directly in front of him.

"Athrun."


At my voice, he snapped his head up. There was great surprise in his silver-blue eyes as he looked at me.

".....What?"

“I happened to hear part of what you were talking about just earlier. What does ‘lower class’ mean?”

All Athrun could do was stand there and nod hesitantly. He seemed to have a confused expression, as if he himself didn’t know why he wasn’t able to answer me.

“I never want to hear you using that term again. The Shiru tribe is now considered to be citizens of Arxia first and foremost, and no longer citizens of Artolas. In Arxia, the Shiru tribe is no different from commoners. All commoners have no distinctions from each other, and are only below the king of Arxia and then the nobility.”

I strongly emphasized the part that there was still someone above the Shiru tribe in rank, while there was no longer anyone below their rank. Although I still wonder if he really understood why I was remonstrating him, he did mutter “I got it” in the end while making a  shape with his lips.

CHAPTER 102

THE REASON FOR QUARRELING

It seems that without me realizing it, the stories about me showing the shape of snowflakes and letting everyone at the Shiru children's tents meet Rashiok have been heard by the farmers' children. Well, I probably should have realized that it's impossible to stop children from gossiping, and it's fine, anyways.

Come to think of it though, recently children have been sticking to me so much with me as the center of attention that it's like I always have a flock of them following me around everywhere, so I have been thinking about setting some boundaries.

"The Shiru children are hogging Eliza-sama! We want to play with her as well!!"

"Eliza-sama's living in our tent! There's nothing wrong with anything!"

"It's unfair that only you guys get to play with the draconis!"

"Even if you say so, none of you came over to become friends with Eliza-sama until now!"

"Why haven't you guys ever called for us!? You're just hogging Eliza-sama! Isn't it more fun to play with everyone!?"

"It's not like I'm the only one with Eliza-sama, so how can I be hogging her! Besides, Eliza-sama isn't a toy!!"

A Shiru girl and a farmer boy were struggling to pull me in their direction from opposite sides, having an argument. Well, simply speaking, this is a children's quarrel. Judging from their comments, it seems that the children are getting a little overly fond of me.

Maybe I've done a bad thing. From their point of view, they might not want to let go of me when I have to leave them. But still, being tightly packed in by dozens of children every day, it's an indescribable feeling and it's causing me to break down. It's, a bit crushing.

“Then, it’ll be great if Eliza-sama can stay in our tent starting from today!”

“Stop saying such silly things, Reka! Didn’t the clan leaders decide where Eliza-sama would be staying?”

The farmer boy holding on to me by wrapping his arms around my stomach behind me seems to be a boy named Reka who speaks with a bit of a countryside accent. Since I haven’t interacted with the farmer children in the other tents at all, I don’t know him at all. The other girl who’s pulling me is a Shiru girl named Tira that’s currently in front of me with her arms around my neck; she’s usually in charge of helping take care of me. Although they’re bickering, it’s more like friendly banter, so I think they actually get along pretty well with each other. However, why are they getting so heated up with me in the middle?

Is this where I should step in and tell them to stop arguing over me? I just tried to lose myself in thinking and ignoring reality in front of me, but I soon regretted it when my vision began to darken.

I finally felt an icy sensation in my head, along with a painful throbbing sensation. Urk, my neck, my stomach, they hurt so much from being tugged on.

Ahh, am I going to die here? Dying of suffocation thanks to a girl who’s only one or two years older than me pulling on my neck, or will I be crushed to death, or choked to death.....



“Oi, you guys had better cut it out already! Reka, Tira! Eliza-sama’s turning pale.”

At that moment, a boy cut through the wall of children surrounding me, making me view him almost like a hero descending from the sky in the nick of time. He peeled both Reka and Tira’s arms off of me, and knuckled both of them on the head. He’s about the same height as Tira, and is shaking his silvery-blue hair. – Oh my, this guy’s definitely familiar.

“....., Athrun?”

When I muttered the name I learned the other day, he instantly turned his head towards me. On his face was a look of surprised innocence, shock that I remembered his name.

“You..... remember my name?”

“Of course. Rather than that, thank you for helping me. It was getting a little painful.”

“It was probably a lot more than painful. You were turning dreadfully pale.”

I just looked directly into his look of surprise, and shrugged. It was indeed painful enough that I had prepared for death. Now that I look closer at him he smiled a slight smile which was somehow a bit mesmerizing, and then he gingerly started pulling me by my sleeve. When I noticed what he was doing, Athrun was getting angry with and scolding Tira who had calmed down and looked like she was apologetic, as well as a boy who’s exactly my height and a little shorter than Tira.

Well, this boy seems to be the one from earlier called Reka. While his eyes were darting in every direction nervously, he apologized to me together with Tira.

“I’m really sorry, Eliza-sama.....”

“I definitely won’t do this again, Eliza-sama.....”

With Tira and Reka’s apologies, the surrounding children seem to have regained their senses as well, and they all looked a little guilty as if they had done something wrong.

Well, now that some of their eyes are watering up, erm, how to say it, now I’m starting to feel like I’m the one who’s guilty of doing something bad in reverse. Well, to begin with, it’s really because of my lack of thought in not stopping them.

“N, no..... I’m sorry as well to everyone. Even though I was showing off some rare things, it was unfair of me to not call the children from the other tents as well.”

I remembered Reka’s words from the argument just earlier, and I lowered my head in apology and self-reflection as well. If someone with a lot of new and interesting toys just made friends with a lot of other people but not with you, well, of course that would make you feel left out.

The main causers of the quarrel in the first place, Reka and Tira, as well as Athrun looked at each other with looks of incomprehension as if they couldn't understand why I was apologizing as well. And when they looked at me again, Tira stuck her tongue out at me mischievously, while Athrun had a wry smile and Reka seemed to be overjoyed with a big smile on his face.

"The next time I come up with something fun, I'll invite you guys along as well. I'll talk to Teo and ask if I can stay in the farmer children's tents as well. Will that be alright with you?"

While Reka was looking overjoyed again as expected, he also turned around to look at all the other farmer children and nodded at them – the ones that were complaining it was unfair – then he turned back to me and replied "that's great!" It seems that although Reka is slightly short, he's probably one of the leaders among the farmer children.

"I never would have expected Eliza-sama to apologize to us, but anyways if Eliza-sama wants to come play with us, that's totally fine. We'll make sure to get along with the Shiru children."

As Reka grinned widely, Tira apologized as well to him as a leader among the Shiru children, and they made up at the end with a hug. Is this what making up with each other is supposed to be like, I wonder.

Both of them had also lowered their heads when Athrun came to arbitrate between them. Just the other day there had still been some class struggles between them left behind from the time of the now defunct Artolas Kingdom, but it seems that these divisions weren't deeply ingrained into them yet and that they're children that listen to reason. Well, I could only smile wryly as I'm still a little older than they are mentally even though I'm roughly the same age as Tira and the others on the outside.

".....Reka. Um, can you stop using the term, 'Shiru children?' For all of us, the Shiru tribe, or lower class, none of that exists anymore. All of us are now Arxians, and have become citizens of Kaldia."

Athrun turned around and said that to Reka with a complicated expression on his face. It looked just like his expression from the other day. Did he understand my meaning, is he agreeing with me, is he carrying out my will?

".....Mmm. I got it, I won't say that term anymore."

I wonder if Reka was there as well on that day a few days ago, Reka took a glance at me then nodded joyfully.

CHAPTER 103

ARMY REORGANIZATION

In this last month of winter, the snow is finally beginning to clear up little by little. There's still a little while left until my eighth birthday's celebration though, as the custom here is to celebrate it a bit after my actual birthday has passed.

"Teo, how are things?"

I was asking Teo to tell me the results of training the Kaldia army for three months on how to handle horses like the Shiru tribe does. With a serious expression, he checked each of the army's formations, examining how they moved, commanding them by raising his voice and using hand gestures.

"Agil and Calvin's squads have excellent results. They have quick responses to commands, and their horses are orderly. There's also no problems with Gunther's squad. However, Locks and Renon's squads are still a bit lacking. They need to get more used to horses."

The members of Locks and Renon's squads that he pointed out nodded in response, while stopping to catch their breaths. These two squads are composed solely of new recruits that have entered the army earlier this year in spring, so their horse handling is conspicuously much more unskilled than the other squads. Their training period as apprentice soldiers has just ended in fall, which is when they started training to become cavalry soldiers, so it can't be helped.

Anyways, today's training is now over. I dismissed the soldiers, and dismounted my horse as well. Teo came up to me looking like he was thinking about something. He was also thoughtful enough to offer me a towel to wipe my sweat off with. While doing so, he also spoke his mind.

".....My lord, I have a proposal."

"Hold on a minute. We also have something to propose to our lord."

What's going on, before I could even reply, another voice cut in from the side. When I looked to see who it was, Gunther, along with Calvin and Agil, were all heading over to speak with me.

"Got it, I'll listen to both proposals. Summarize them for me."

I'll listen to both proposals, then make a decision based on my best judgment. Teo and Gunther seem to have decided on who would go first based just on eye contact, and Teo gave his proposal first.

"Well then. My recommendation is that the entire Kaldia army should be converted into cavalry troops."

It's a simple proposal. His reason is most likely the difference in skill level between the cavalry squads and the other half of the Kaldia army – the infantry squads. As a new type of unit, I put the best soldiers into it. The soldiers that were judged to have abilities necessary for battling on horseback were incorporated into the cavalry squads, and as the domain lord I participate in and supervise their training every day. However, this has caused both the average skill level and morale of the remaining infantry troops to drop as they weren't picked.

In the first place, Arxia treats cavalry soldiers and infantry soldiers differently. Cavalry troops have stronger attack power and mobility, and since they also need special training in horse handling, they usually obtain higher ranks than infantry troops. In the royal army there's also the title of knight, which can then lead to noble peerage.

".....And Gunther's proposal?"

"My proposal is, could you just let me be an infantry squad captain instead?"

Uh, oh. I somehow managed to stop myself from making any sounds of surprise. Teo and Gunther were now glaring at each other. Well, it's only natural, their proposals completely conflict with each other.

"Gunther, is that really fine?"

More surprisingly, Gunther is asking to step down from the position of cavalry squad captain and become an infantry squad captain, which is basically like a demotion. Before creating cavalry squads, due to my father's reign of tyranny causing bandits to run rampant and the army to become disorganized, the Kaldia army lacked a formal

army rank system. As for the army's leader, I had just put Gunther in charge before as he was the most skilled and obvious choice.

Although Gunther wants to be the infantry squad captain, the Kaldia army technically doesn't have this position currently. So if he becomes an infantry squad captain instead of a cavalry squad captain, his rank will technically go down and he would no longer be considered the leader of the army.

"Ahh. I'm more used to fighting on my feet. You can just have Agil and Calvin lead the cavalry squads. Calvin's also the longest-serving soldier as well as the oldest in the army, the other soldiers really believe in him."

I do know that Agil has been constantly acting as Gunther's adjutant before, but I haven't paid as much attention to the older soldier Calvin up until now. When I observe him closely, as a soldier – not to mention a former bandit – he has quite a calm atmosphere about him as our eyes met.

"Then, you think that the two of them should become commanders?"

Since even everyone in my army gathered together is still less people than one division of an actual army, with so few people it's simple to do ranks. At the top is me, the domain lord, and under me are a few commanders. Beneath the commanders are squad captains, and their adjutants. After that there's only regular soldiers and apprentice soldiers in training. Since I'm now taking on the role of their leader, I have a different relationship with the regular soldiers and apprentice soldiers.

"No, I'm saying the three of us should concurrently serve as commanders and squad captains in the army."

"I won't allow that. The roles of commanders and squad captains are fundamentally different. The commander is the one who gives orders, while the squad captain leads soldiers to carry out those orders. Doing both simultaneously isn't possible."

I furrowed my eyebrows and immediately rejected this idea of his. Commanders are usually in the back of the army, while squad captains have to lead from the front, it's incompatible. In the first place, if a commander is in the front lines and gets engaged in combat and can't give orders, the system of command would break down. Then the whole meaning of having army ranks in the first place would be lost.

I know that this is a good timing to reorganize the Kaldia army's system of command. I already informed Gunther about the message a while back from the king and how it was likely that relations would worsen with the neighboring countries. Both of us agreed that we should prepare for the possibility of upcoming battles.

It's been just a little over two years since I finished my military training in the barracks myself. I know that they're no longer leading unruly lives like when they were bandits, they're now used to living in an orderly and disciplined fashion, they carry and act out all my orders, and they have the realization that they're part of the military now.

However, as for making them into more of an actual army, the blunt reality is that there aren't enough soldiers, nor do they have enough experience and education. The only person in the army with an education is Claudia, who's serving both as my bodyguard and is in charge of dealing with all military documents, it's obvious that there's not enough people with the ability to do this work.



When I looked at Gunther again after thinking about how to organize the army all this time to myself, he had a much calmer expression than I would have expected of him considering I flatly rejected his idea. Maybe he knew from the start that I would probably reject it.

"In that case, we don't need commanders until the size of our army gets a bit larger. The three of us can serve as squad captains. Just like before, my lord can be the commander of the entire army. After all, we don't have that many soldiers. At any rate, none of the soldiers are leader material other than the three of us. If such a guy joins the army, you can consider making him a commander after giving him some experience."

".....Well, this sounds reasonable."

In order for such a leader type to join the army, I need to put more effort into recruitment. I also reminded myself mentally to give Claudia an official army position soon. I took a glance at Teo, making another mental note to think about how to integrate the Shiru warriors into the Kaldia army system of command. And, I still need to take care of his proposal as well.

“I don’t know if I have all the details, but Gunther wants to lead infantry still, right? In that case, consider my proposal unnecessary.”

Since I nodded and said Gunther’s proposal was reasonable, it seems that Teo is maturely withdrawing his proposal. Since Teo is still technically an outsider to the Kaldia army, this is also a reasonable action by him.

“No, your proposal was useful as well. Thank you, Teomer. Gunther, wait a little while on reorganizing the army. I’ll think on it.”

I don’t really have the knowledge necessary to do something like reorganizing the army all by myself. When I said that I’ll think on it, I really meant that I’ll discuss it with Earl Terejia. Gunther probably knows this as well, and he didn’t have any objections.

Before the snow thaws in spring, I’m going to have a thorough new system of command in place, and I also want to increase the number of volunteers joining the army as much as possible.

CHAPTER 104

MEETING

I'm now completely accustomed to a lifestyle of moving back and forth between the Mansion of Golden Hills and the new citizens' simple makeshift village, and I was just thinking about hurrying the construction of the domain lord's mansion in the center of Kaldia at the end of winter.

"Eta..... Elle..... Eri....."

I had just finished my work and was on my way back to the tents from the mansion when I started to hear a voice coming from above me.

What's this? I looked up at the window above me suspiciously, and I saw sparkling golden blonde hair framed by the blue sky.

"Eli..... Eliza-dono!!"

".....Yes, what is it?"

I somehow managed to swallow my sigh, and responded to her. It's been a long time since I've felt this familiar feeling of not knowing how to deal with her.

Of course, this voice belonged to Claudia. The strange words I heard earlier must have been her mangled attempts to get my name right.

"It's been so long since I last saw you! I think it's been over two months!"

Claudia seemed to be excited to see me as she grinned widely and stepped onto the windowsill.

"That's dangerous, Claud-"

Before I could finish saying Claudia-dono, I was interrupted, because the person herself was ignoring my warning and was hanging out the window. Of course, Claudia is preparing to jump from a second story window.

I held my breath. It felt like my heart was going to stop beating.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

And with that, she jumped and landed with soft, lithe catlike movements, and stood there grinning at me with an idiotic expression on her face.

I’m unable to close my wide-open mouth. Just what is she. She’s just impossible. Please get out of this otome game world and back in the shonen manga you belong to. Although, I would honestly be very troubled if she wasn’t here by my side.

This sight was just too shocking for me, so much so that I was trembling all over. Even though I know it’s bad manners, I couldn’t help but vent by shouting at her.

“JUST WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, JUMPING DOWN FROM THE SECOND FLOOR!”

“Uwa!?”

Maybe Claudia’s ears are extra sensitive, she grabbed them really tight after I shouted suddenly at her. Her sky colored eyes were looking at me wide and round with surprise, but I continued my words with a strong force behind them.

“Please stop doing these things outside the realm of common sense. I thought that my heart was going to stop.”

“Eliza-dono.....”

With a blank expression, Claudia muttered my name. Then, she seemed to get happy about something, an innocent, delighted expression lit up her face. Ahh, she really looks like a young child when she’s smiling like this. She’s too pure.

“Got it, I swear to never do it again. I didn’t think that you would be that worried about me!”

“Hah?”

What’s this about me being worried for her?

Some words I never would have expected to hear from her came out of her mouth, and this time it was my turn to have a silly expression on my face.

“Weren’t you worried that I would injure myself?”

The very atmosphere around us seemed to lighten as Claudia laughed happily. I tried to come up with some sort of response, but I just couldn’t think of anything to say to Claudia.

“Umm, that’s..... Just what exactly did I mean.....”

I have a helpless feeling of wanting to surrender. Claudia was nodding to herself assuredly, saying “yes, that must be it” while striking her palm with her fist. She’s really in a world of her own..... It’s been so long since I’ve been tired like this. It feels like I’m dealing with an incomprehensible opponent.

“There’s a request from Elise-dono.”

I didn’t pay attention to what she said at all. I had a blank look of not knowing what was going on, but Claudia grabbed my wrist without minding that at all.

What’s she doing?

“Ok, let’s get going!”

Where to?



By the time I finally realized what it was that Claudia had said, she already brought me to the room where Elise was recuperating at.

“Ah, Eliza-sama.”

Elise seemed to be simply pleased to see me, but Ratoka who was there as well dressed in maid attire froze at the sight of me. Even though I also felt this was a very uncomfortable situation, for the time being I’ll focus on the noble girl Elise first and put everything else out of my mind.

“It’s been a long time, Elise-sama. I apologize for not coming to see you for so long.”

Despite having some free time for myself since the beginning of winter, I do feel really guilty as I’ve been avoiding this place intentionally.

“No, don’t worry about it. Eliza-sama is the domain lord and must be busy with all the work. Besides, didn’t you send ‘Elise’ to accompany me in your stead? Just for that, you have my deepest gratitude.”

“That’s fine if that’s the case then. I heard that you’ve been having some more seizures recently, how are you feeling now?”

Elise slowly took her gaze off of me to look outside her window, and showed a gentle, lonely expression. It made me a bit anxious, and it also made my heart tighten up in pain.

“I..... still am unable to go outside yet. But it’s okay, it’s still not as bad as before I came here.”

“Elise-dono.....”

I suddenly got a flash of inspiration and wondered if this mild-mannered noble girl would have fun playing with the Shiru children. Even though she can’t run around like they can, it might bring her some comfort just to hear about their experiences and daily life.

.....It might be a good idea to think about who from the Shiru children I want to invite. I still need to talk with Earl Terejia, but on top of taking care of Elise, it’s my duty to help her regain her health any way I can.

As I started mentally listing candidates in my mind, Elise began to talk about the fun times she had lately with Ratoka and her maid Maya. Since this is what she typically will always talk about, I definitely think that I can give my idea a try.

“If me sending ‘Elise’ over to you has helped Elise-sama to have even a little more fun, then that’s a great thing.”

“Yes. I’ve had so much fun. Thank you very much.”

At Elise’s innocent, charming smile, once again her purity gave my heart a terrible blow.

CHAPTER 105

ROPE MAKING

“My lord wants to choose some children to go to the mansion to become playmates?Honestly, I’m a little lost, what’s all this about?”

Teo furrowed his eyebrows as he weaved some ropes on the floor. His face said that he didn’t understand what was going on.

I already talked with Earl Terejia a bit about finding some playmates for Elise, and he had no problems with it, so now I’m asking Teo.

“I suppose it can be a little confusing, but simply speaking, I want some kids to come over to the mansion to be friends with a girl that’s staying there.”

“My lord can’t accompany her? That’s why you need some other children to be her friends?”

It’s exactly as Teo says. If only I could do it myself. However.....

“I’m unable to go there very often. Also, there’s someone there that I find meeting awkward.....”

As I thought about Ratoka, I felt a bitter taste in my mouth. I put him with Elise because I didn’t have anywhere else to leave him and it was a fact that I needed someone to help take care of Elise, but that still doesn’t change the fact that I myself have stayed far away from Elise.

The main reason for the chasm between us, Ratoka saying I was using him as a substitute for Kamil, is still piercing and hurting my heart even now. Seeing Ratoka again, it felt like my heart was being mangled.

Kamil, my citizens, the nameless gravestone, me..... I can’t explain it well, but I think that Ratoka is currently a living embodiment of my traumas.

He looks so similar to me. He’s a victim of my father’s persecution, which also caused his mother to go insane. Into the emptiness that Kamil left behind, did I really slowly

put him there. All of these feelings were gathering up into me and shaping into disgust and guilt.

Even now, I still can't forget that time when he threw a rock at me.

".....Honestly speaking, I don't have anyone truly close to me that I can trust now."

I've gone off topic due to my emotions interfering too much with my thoughts. Thinking on how to fix my accidental revealing of my inner self, I decided to change the topic to a plan that Earl Terejia brought up the last time I spoke to him about playmates for Elise.

"What's this all of a sudden?"

Teo tilted his head. His expression says that he can't keep up with this sudden change of topic.

"I need more personnel, and right now there's not even any candidates. Not only is it me, Earl Terejia is also quite isolated as a noble, so I can't count on him for this either."

Kamil was the only one being educated to support me in the future, but he's no longer here. Claudia's useless at everything other than being a bodyguard, while Mrs. Marshan's age is too far apart from mine.

".....Ahh, so that's what it is. Meaning, having some playmates enter the mansion, they're also candidates for becoming your closest aides in the future."

Teo managed on his own to infer the connections based on what I said so far. It's very helpful that he's so quick to understand.

"Living at the mansion will probably be for the long term. After all, Earl Terejia was the one who came up with this idea to help me find future candidates to assist me."

Elise needs some playmates to keep her company, and I also need to raise some candidates to become my closest aides in the future, this is two birds with one stone. Well, this isn't a bad thing for anyone.

With the exception of their battle prowess, objectively speaking my new citizens are still much weaker in other areas than Kaldia's original inhabitants. Regardless of the

fact that my own original citizens aren't really involved in making decisions in Kaldia, the new citizens will probably strongly feel like newcomers themselves.

However, things will greatly change if they provide several of the lord's closest aides. The domain lord's existence still has an incredibly huge influence on the citizens.

".....I have to talk with the other chiefs before I can give you permission. In short, I can allow it as the leader, but you still need to ask the children in question themselves if they want to go to the mansion."

"That's fine."

It's unavoidable that people will dislike being ordered by their domain lord. After all, I'm asking children to become playmates for a noble guest of mine. It would be easier if I needed some adults to do a job, but since I need children, I've decided that it's better to choose someone that will probably get along well with Elise.

At any rate, they wouldn't be living at this mansion all the time anyways. When winter's over, I intend to return to the village under development with the new citizens, and after that it would be nice if I could come back to visit my summer mansion again on occasion if I have the free time.

As for raising close aides, this isn't something that can be rushed, so there's no hurry.

"And, who specifically do you have in mind?"

"Tira."

"That was an instant reply."

"At the tents, she went out of her way to take good care of me.Her assistance was incredibly helpful. As she's both good at taking care of others and explaining things well, I think she'll be perfect as a noble girl's playmate."

She's been very patient with me who entered their lives so suddenly. And she helped me so much. When I think about it, my chest feels warm, and also a little clogged up.

"Got it. I'll talk with the other chiefs about this tomorrow."

"I'll leave it up to you."

After our conversation finished, Teo went right back to making his ropes. Since I didn't have anything else planned and there was only a little time left until dinner, I watched in interest as Teo made ropes as I've never seen this process before.

While Kaldia citizens also know how to make ropes, I've never seen them during the process. Right now I'm really curious how it's done.

Several minutes passed in silence as I watched Teo work on his ropes, then he finally turned his attention to me again.

".....What are you doing?"

"Watching you make ropes."

"Ahh..... How about I teach you how it's done?"

He didn't say that being watched made it difficult for him to work. No wait, even if he doesn't mind, it's not like I really want to learn or anything.

"For future reference, sure."

Teo seemed to send me a warm look as he nodded and moved next to me. What exactly is that look supposed to be for?

CHAPTER 106

WHAT DO PEOPLE CALL THIS?

Snow has mostly stopped falling, and the sun is starting to show itself more often through the clouds, spring is almost here. Vivid yellow flowers began blooming in places where the accumulated snow was melting, warm winds were now blowing down the Amon Nor mountains, and the melted snow also caused some flooding along the Sera river as the dams weren't completed yet.

"Next year we'll definitely be living over there for winter instead, right?"

"It's difficult to move in winter. I think the adults will definitely complete a dam by this time next year, though."

"Hopefully we can all live in a proper village soon."

From the small hill that my mansion sits on, I can see a fairly wide swath of the flat Kaldia territory. The three children that I decided to pick from the new citizens for Elise's new playmates, Athrun, Tira, and Reka, were looking eastward and chatting with each other. I watched them from behind, and although it may have been unnecessary, I ended up joining their conversation at that point.

".....Some craftsmen from another domain are coming over soon to help us build furniture. The adults will have more work to do then as well."

"Ah, I know about that! Eliza-sama hired them, right?"

"Ahh, err....."

Reka turned around after noticing me and had a big smile. I nodded in embarrassment, but Reka and Tira took both my hands and were jumping up and down in joy.

"I'm really looking forward to it! I wonder if Eliza-sama's new mansion will be finished soon as well?"

Usually Reka talks in a slow drawl as part of his accent, but maybe he's a little overly excited today, his rate of speech has really picked up. Since Tira usually takes such good care of me like an older sister would, I'm more used to her excitement.

"There's still plenty of time for that, I think. Although it's a small mansion, five years time is the standard."

Although I don't want to pour cold water on their hopes, I'll still tell them the truth. Besides, constructing their new village is the number one priority for me, work on the new mansion can be delayed until that's finished.

Reka is clearly pouting now. He's sticking out his lips, and his eyebrows are tightly furrowed.

"Ehh~ Then, it's fine even if we don't finish that dam first. I don't want Eliza-sama to not have a place to spend the winter. Hey, Eliza-sama, we can come back here again for next year's winter."

"Oy, Reka. Don't bother Eliza-sama with your selfish requests."

"Besides, even if we're living here again next year, that doesn't mean that Eliza-sama has to live with us?"

"Aw....."

After being scolded by Athrun and Tira, Reka glumly fell silent. With a wry smile, I reached my hand out to his head, and although he was a little confused at first – I patted him lightly on his hair a few times.

"I'll go and see you guys. As much as I can."

"Really!? It's a promise!"

Children are really so simple, and their emotions change so quickly. Reka was instantly all smiles again, and with the momentum that came with his excitement, he easily jumped back onto his horse.

"I'm going to go back first and help prepare lunch!"

After saying so, Reka rode down the hillside so quickly that I didn't even have time to respond. Athrun, Tira and I could only smile wryly at each other.



Claudia looked quite improper as she was sitting on her desk used for work, swinging her feet. The early spring sunshine was shining down from the window behind her, so I couldn't make out her expression clearly due to the glare.

I was sitting in a chair directly across from her, counting the time pass by in silence. Claudia was the one who had called me over saying she had something to tell me. At least this time she didn't jump down from a second floor window while calling out to me, so I suppose this is better. However, she's been quiet for quite some time now, with her mouth bent into a \sim shape. I don't really know what to say to her in this situation either. For once, she has a thinking face and she's furrowing her eyebrows.

The sound of the water clock indicated that the time just reached noon. Claudia raised her face and looked at me as if she just realized I was sitting here. She still seemed a little confused when she met my gaze, and greeted me hesitantly.

"Eliza.....-dono? Er, Elena-dono? No wait, it's Eliza-dono, I think I got it right. Um..... There's something I'd like to ask you."

I want to applaud myself for not getting a sore neck yet, looking directly at her and waiting for all this time. I've been kept waiting for so long, what could this important thing that she has to say to me be?

Come to think of it, Claudia's finally been able to remember my name more accurately as of late. Ahh, I feel slightly dizzy from the mental fatigue of waiting so long.....

With a slight sigh in my voice, I replied to Claudia.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Ah..... um. Hopefully you won't be angry at me."

This is really rare, Claudia started in an apologetic manner before her main question.

“This is from quite a while back, about the bandits we caught earlier last year. At that time, why did you do the dirty work personally?”

Claudia was tilting her head, and her golden hair was making soft swishing sounds.

I see, so it's about that. She must know that my emotions are stable now. Probably, she didn't ask me right after that incident out of consideration for me. As always, her intuition is like the wild instinct of an animal, she can detect my emotional state so well.

“There were various reasons. I can't explain it easily – but if I had to say, I think I just wanted to kill him since he deserved to die.”

“What about the other bandit? Did he just freeze to death in the dungeon.....”

“Ah, probably. I thought it was too bothersome to kill him directly. Him dying just like that without anyone knowing was quite convenient, really.”

Claudia nodded silently. She's refraining from commenting further, and she may not agree with me, but she does understand my reasons. Seeing her reaction, a mystery popped up in my mind.

Why was it that I always considered Claudia so useless?

It's something that I've only realized recently myself, but I can be quite selfish. Thanks to my previous life's memories, I want to be treated like an adult, and while I acted as mature as I possibly could, I always relied on other adults, just like a child would.

But when an adult like Mrs. Hortensia came along, and wanted to treat me as a child, and when it seemed like she would spoil me to her utmost extent, I was terrified and my spirit broke down.

That's why – I liked having Kamil around. He was important for me. We were children together, we were fellow humans, we were friends, and I was also his lord, even now, his memories still pierce my heart.

I couldn't trust him, and I sent him away from me, so of course I would feel guilty about his death.

And, Claudia meets the same conditions that Kamil did. She's just as pure as the Shiru children, and she's a person who I'm very grateful to because she accepts me as I am.

So, why is it that I can't see her the same way I saw Kamil? This is an incredible mystery to myself.

"Got it. Sorry to have taken up so much of your time. I probably should have asked you much earlier."

Her confusion just earlier disappeared like it never even existed, and Claudia was back to her cheerful self again. And just like that, she left the room.

Then somehow, I managed to come up with an answer to the mystery in my head.

Perhaps, to me, she's neither an adult nor a child. Also, I probably see the Shiru children the same way.

I still can't decide whether or not I should call her my friend. Even though, I can now tell myself so easily, that Kamil was my friend.

CHAPTER 107

ATHRUN'S OATH

The skies are clearing, and the snow is melting. After the snow completely melted around the Mansion of Golden Hills, we returned to the village under construction. Nothing big happened this past winter, and I confirmed in the new village that everything was alright with the water sources and supply.

“There’s a lot of garbage this year as well.”

Teomer was muttering to himself with a frown on his face. The stone path for the village under construction was still incomplete, with dirt exposed everywhere and dead branches and plants scattered about. It’s also quite muddy, and there’s even some fish lying around here and there, with a few of them bouncing up and down. I suppose this is all due to the recent flooding.

“Well, the bright side is that this provides us with quite a nice supply of fish for the time being.”

Teo could only shake his head as he gave orders to his warriors to gather and wash the fish laying by the roadside. It was really muddy and they weren’t used to this type of food gathering, so it took about half an hour to collect and clean all the fish we saw.

“I’ll also go wash myself in the river before returning. The temperature should be just about right.”

During winter, my new citizens had borrowed the bathing facilities in the barracks, but that facility only has hot water when it’s time to cook food. I think that something can potentially be developed to automatically adjust the flames and provide fuel as an upgrade to modernize the bathing facilities, but unfortunately Kaldia doesn’t have the means to do so. So unfortunately, my new citizens still don’t have their own place to bathe yet. This was one of Kamil’s plans that he left behind, but it seems like there’s still quite a while until it can be realized.

.....I don’t have enough money, time, or personnel. Maybe I should write down the ideas that I want to actualize but don’t have the means to do yet. There would be no

meaning to it if I forget what I wanted to do in the first place if I have the ability to do so in the future.



The next morning I had the Kaldia army help in gathering up the new citizens' tents and belongings, and help transport it all by horseback. By noon, the hillside that had been full of tents was already well on its way of returning to its original state.

"Somehow, it feels like I'm returning to a nomadic lifestyle."

Reka next to me seemed to be having fun while looking all around him. Since the children aren't of much help with the heavy labor and to not let them get in the way, I've gathered them here with me to help with the process of collecting the small metal parts that help bind the tents to the ground. Not only were the Shiru children with me, the farmer children were here as well, and even the children that usually stayed with their parents were here today.

"Unfortunately, this is only for today. I'll work hard and finish everything so I can come and visit you guys as much as possible."

"If Eliza-sama works hard, you can really make it happen. Our King would never lie, right?"

"Well, whatever a domain lord says is close enough to a proclamation. I can't say things I'm uncertain of."

I answered Reka while I continued to collect the small metal parts. After all, I figured I'd help everyone personally as well. Tira just happened to meet my eyes then as she was sitting in front of me, and she smiled at me. I kept pulling up the small metal parts that fastened the tents, carefully wiped the dirt off of them, and tied them into bundles by wrapping ropes several times around the parts. The new citizens prepared this rope themselves, just like Teo.

"By the way. Sometimes you guys call me 'King' instead of lord, why is that? The King of Arxia is the only King in Arxia."

As I continued to work with my hands, I figured that now was a good timing to ask this question I've always been wondering about. I've been called "King" by them several

times now, and it's perked my curiosity. Although only other Arxian nobles can understand the Artolan language they speak, it'll still be quite a bit of trouble if someone hears the children calling me their "King" and can understand it.

"Eh? Mm, but don't the people in your army also call you Charlie?"

"Oh, do you know the meaning of Charlie as well?"

Even now, I still don't know why people kept calling me Charlie. Even though Mrs. Marshan is proficient in her language abilities, she didn't know either, and Kamil started this trend of calling me Charlie that somehow spread to my entire Kaldia army. That's why I figured that maybe Kamil was using a term from another language or he just made up a name entirely to call me by.

That's why I'm shocked that Reka, with his Artolan heritage, knew this word. I had thought this possibility to be the unlikeliest, but maybe it's just that some ancient words have been left over here in the Jugfena region. The Arxian language in the Jugfena region and the Artolan language share an archaic root language. Of course, there are many similar sounding words between the languages.

"Let's see..... We call you our King simply because that's our term for the person ranked above our clan chiefs. That's all."

That's all, he says, as he smiled as if he knew some secret I didn't. I feel from his expression like he's still not telling me everything, but I have no evidence to base this on, so I'll let it go. When I happened to look at Tira though, she seemed to have listened in on our conversation as she had the same secretive grin that Reka did.

"Ok, it's time to get moving! Hurry up and move, Gunther will lead the way!"

In the distance, I heard Teomer giving the order to move out. I had left Teo and Gunther to decide between themselves who would lead everyone on the way, and it seems that it will be Gunther. It seems that the two of them became quite friendly with each other over the winter training the army did. Is it because they're close in age, I wonder.

"Alright, we should probably get moving as well."

Tira wrapped up the last bundle of metal parts with a small sigh in her voice. Looking around at all the other children, I also saw those that were disappointed like she was, as well as children that seemed really excited and were having lots of fun.

Among all the children, I noticed that a certain silvery-blue head of hair that really stands out in a crowd was missing. He's also one of the earliest to physically mature among his age group, so even without his hair color he's easy to spot due to his height alone. But no matter how much I looked for him, he wasn't there with the other children.

"By the way, where's Athrun today?"

"Eh? Well, since he's so big, maybe he's helping some of the slightly older children."

The children that are ten and older are helping the women gather all the cloths and bundle them together on horseback. I looked over in that direction, but I still didn't see Athrun at all.

"What do you need Athrun for?"

"Nothing. I just got curious since I didn't see him around."

"Mmm. Oh, perfect, Athrun's returning just now!"

Reka pointed behind me, as I turned around and looked. Some children were leading a group of horses in this direction, and Athrun was among them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! We've brought the horses, so let's begin loading!"

A girl who seemed about fifteen years old was acting as their leader and giving orders. It was easy to tell at a glance that all the children bringing the horses here were several years older than the children I was with. Since our work is finished as well, they probably noticed and headed over to help us get started with the moving.

During all this, Athrun came up to me and slapped me genially on my shoulder for some reason.

"Eliza-sama, I have something I'd like to say to you."

What's this about? Is it something that I have to take care of right now? As I finished packing the tools in my hand into a sack, I turned around to face Athrun silently. As if he wasn't saying anything so serious, he told me something without any hesitation.

"I'm going to enter the Kaldia army starting today."

.....With such a simple sentence, it was like he dropped a bomb on me.

“.....Huh?”

Although he had told me he had something to say, this was more along the lines of a proclamation. I had no idea what was going on, so all I could do was blink and keep looking up at the much taller Athrun.

“If I can’t become a Shiru warrior, I can at least fight for our King and the Kaldia army. That’s why, I’m going to join your army. Enter it, and stay there.”

Although I had indeed planned on recruiting new members for the army soon, it seems that my first applicant has shown up from an unexpected place. He’s a young boy with determined eyes and a direct gaze that look like he’s made a decision he definitely won’t step back from, so my face couldn’t help but put on a serious expression automatically as well. Then, I stood up and nodded as gracefully as possible.

“I shall allow you to enter my army. I look forward to your accomplishments. – Thank you for becoming my warrior.”

CHAPTER 108

MY SECOND BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

Now that the harvest season has concluded, this year as well I'm going to wear dignified formal red and black colored knight attire with silver adornments for my own upcoming birthday celebration. Earl Terejia suggested that I leave my hair down this year, but just like last time, I decided to leave it bundled on my head. Since my deceased father always kept his hair long and we look so similar, I want to avoid looking like him as much as possible, both for my own sake and to avoid my citizens seeing his shadow in me.

Last year I didn't hold my birthday celebration since I was in the royal capital officially entering the Arxian church in their religious ceremony, but this year I'm holding it again, as a good opportunity to see how things are in my domain.

This year as well the celebration will last for three days, with a big feast on the first day in all the villages. Since this year's parade by my army will also include the Shiru warriors who have become something like another personal army, it should be quite grand. We also started our recruitment process for the army, and about ten or so people from nearby villages with plenty of hands to spare signed up. They're not going to participate in the parade because they still lack too much training, but that shouldn't make any difference.

Another reason why things will be grander this year compared to two years ago is that the economic situation in my domain is gradually recovering, so we made the parade appropriately grander as well. If the parade seems worse off even when people's living standards are improving, then it would give the citizens unrest and uneasiness.

That's why, this time I'll be riding on Rashiok for the parade. Also thanks to the previous incident where Ratoka threw a rock at me, this time maybe riding on an intimidating beast will prevent such a thing from occurring again.

Rashiok's finally stopped growing, and he's a bit taller than a warhorse is. Since I'm still too small, I can't ride atop him unassisted, so despite the fact that Rashiok didn't like it, I used a saddle whenever I would ride Rashiok.

"Things seem rather quiet this year."

“.....Ahh, you mean the citizens?”

“Is that so?”

Gunther and Claudia were riding next to me and serving as my bodyguards, and since they're quite experienced at this, I can probably trust their insights. Gunther has a face that says warrior written all over it, but Claudia just looks like a normal beautiful girl as long as she keeps quiet.

Gunther seems to be much more relaxed this time around than during the tense atmosphere from two years ago, and while Claudia doesn't know about the details from the last celebration, she was still carefully observing things and on guard just in case anything happened. Her instincts are like a wild animal's. Maybe I'm spending too much time thinking about idle things, but they're at exactly my eye level because Rashiook is taller than the horses they're riding on.

Just like the previous time, the citizens had created a path of flowers for us to parade through, and in the first village we passed through, Claria village, people saw us off with smiles. Since this village is the closest one to my Mansion of Golden Hills, it has the most visible amount of change from my influence. The people were smiling at me just as they did while interacting with the Shiru tribe earlier this winter.

“Cheers to our domain lord! May Eliza-sama and Earl Terejia-sama always remain healthy! Cheers to our domain lord!”

During our parade on the flower path, they kept calling out to me. It seems like the villagers are cheering for me.

“They're cheering you on. Isn't that nice, my lord – oi?”

Gunther who was laughing heartily suddenly stopped in surprise and his voice rose up an octave at seeing me. Somehow I managed to remain sitting upright and look forward, but tears were streaming down my cheeks. I think it's lucky that I don't wear any makeup yet as I'm still a child.

“Oh, ah, after we leave the village, let's take a short break.”

“We can't have you parading in front of everyone with a crying face, after all.”

It felt like I could even hear them smiling wryly just from Gunther and Claudia's words. They sound surprised, but also have heartwarming words for me at the same time. Maybe Rashiok understands my crying as well, he's using his long, snake-like tail to pat me on my back. His ears keep flickering in a manner that's pleasant to watch, and the sunshine is glittering off of his scales.



There was no feeling of heavy tension in the other villages either, but it seemed like the villagers' eyes were still looking for something in me. Life is getting better for them as well, but as the domain lord, there's still some sense of distrust towards me remaining. Cyril village, the village last time where the rock incident occurred, had the heaviest remnants of an unpleasant atmosphere remaining. While I could feel a few glares directed at me here and there, most villagers in Cyril village just watched us silently as if this was a funeral procession.

Two years have passed since I've begun actively taking part in my public duties. Since these villagers almost never see me though, it's impossible for them to judge me since I'm never around. I'm willing to accept their harsh gazes.

When we visited the last village on the parade route this year, Nezu village, everyone looked at me with an entirely different type of expression. There were those that were smiling gently at me, those with an expression of awe as they stared directly at me, there were a variety of reactions but they all seemed to be so warm.

"My lord, hey, over there. Take a look."

Gunther pointed to his right with such a happy expression on his face. When I looked in that direction, standing by the edge of the flower path in front of a group of girls, were the two short-haired village girls from before, waving their hands at me. They were wearing flower crowns on their heads, with dark red as the main theme.

I was so happy at seeing them, that I couldn't keep control of my expression anymore. My eyes and mouth couldn't help but crinkle into a smiling face. While they kept waving at me, they also started shouting to me.

"My lord, I wish you the best of luck!"

"Happy birthday, my lord!"

Suddenly, the villagers standing on both sides of the path cheered thunderously and threw something in the air. It was colorful and fluttery, and I could see that it was flower petals the same color as the flowers the girls were wearing in their hair, and the inner corners of my eyes couldn't help but get hot again.

I must be too young still, I can't control my tear ducts at all.

Being welcomed so endearingly by Nezu village like this, having so many people smile at me, it's a little embarrassing.

【 PART III 】

CHAPTER 109

THE FLOW OF TIME

After being showered in flower petals by my citizens as blessings for my eighth birthday's celebration, life has been going on rather shockingly peacefully and calmly. Ever since my fifth birthday's celebration, my days have always been so busy, so it's unbelievable how there's such a long respite now, and another year passed by in a flash just like that. I'm now nine years old.



As the horse-drawn carriage rattled and shook on the paved road, I took the time to reflect on how this past year went.

Honestly, it was such a peaceful year. Of course, it also means that things have remained stagnant.

The relations I have with the people around me haven't changed at all in one year. I still can't pass by Ratoka without having my heart twinge, and I still avoid Mrs. Hortensia as much as I can, so I keep my distance still from both of them. It might be more accurate to say that I had gotten so used to the new pace of things that I only noticed an entire year had passed after something unexpected interrupted this lifestyle.

"It's rather cool for early summer this year."

Maybe it's to free himself from the silence, Earl Terejia muttered a comment about the weather as he sat across in the carriage from me while fanning himself. Although the air inside the carriage is mostly enclosed within a small space, it doesn't feel stifling, rather relaxing instead today.

"Yes, indeed. It feels quite nice."

Since I was also getting a little bored as well, I decided to join him in conversation and agreed with him. He glanced at me, perhaps sensing that I wanted to engage him in conversation, and he began talking about the recent situation in the royal capital.

“When I visited the royal capital earlier this spring, I hardly heard any problems about the issue of the crown prince. As expected, it’s calmed down a bit since it’s already been two years since the crown prince was decided. Rather than that, it’s rumored that the end of the Rindarl Kingdom is finally near.”

“The Rindarl Kingdom, is it. Well, two years ago they were saying the same thing.”

“I guess it was going to happen sooner or later. Regarding the issue of the crown prince, last winter Prince Albert has completed the process of entering a monastery.”

Maybe he’s thinking back to last year, the Earl was now looking at the ceiling of the carriage. His expression seems like he’s eating some disgusting insects, the decision about forcing the first prince to enter a monastery is one that the Earl doesn’t comprehend even today.

“There seems to have been a big commotion about that earlier last summer.”

Claudia who was sitting next to me spoke up as well. Just like last year, she’ll be serving simultaneously as my maid and bodyguard in the royal capital. Currently, the only ones that can serve as my attendants are Claudia, Ratoka, and Elise. But I won’t bring Elise along for the sake of her health, and since I still haven’t improved things with Ratoka, I left him behind this year.

“About that big commotion. He might as well have said it straight that he was disinheriting the first prince. Just what is our King thinking, I don’t get it at all.....”

Maybe he didn’t want to think about the commotion caused by the crown prince incident, Earl Terejia started complaining to us as if he wanted somebody to vent to. It must be hard on him that he still can’t understand the royal family’s thought process.

Even if we don’t know the reason, even if we don’t agree with it, we have to obey whatever the King decides on. That’s the way things are in this country. However, there’s a big emotional difference for us, his subjects, between knowing the King’s intentions and not knowing what he wants.

“Anyways, if there’s so many rumors about Rindarl floating around this year, we need to increase our guard along the eastern border. Now, just to iron out the details.....”

“Earl Terejia, how about having a meeting with Earl Einsbark and Margrave Genas? If we can form a united front by ourselves, that would be much more effective than having to go through the House of Lords.”

“Of course that would be for the best, but the problem is Margrave Genas’s wife. It’s difficult to establish any relations with how much she detests Kaldia.”

With a heavy sigh, Earl Terejia covered his eyes with his left hand. When I noticed that he seemed to be getting pale, I took a good look at him.

Seeing him like this, I can’t help but think he’s gotten so old now, even though it’s only been a little over four years since the night I first met him. Two years ago the earl’s condition got much worse, and I’ve been trying to take over as much of his work as I can, but even so he still has so much on his plate to deal with. Although he isn’t able to work as much as he did before, he still does an unreasonable amount of work for his age. He’s such a workaholic. It seems like he hasn’t been getting much sleep recently, and I’m worried about how he’s doing. It would be nice if he doesn’t suddenly die on me.

“In the first place, we’d have to decide on what to discuss if we meet. I’m not an expert in military affairs. Einsbark is quite reasonable and easy to make dealings with, but it’s still going to be difficult to establish something like a united front.”

Earl Terejia started talking to nobody in particular, as if he just wanted to complain. Seeing this, I decided to look over at Claudia. As for military affairs, the Rolentsors are the most famous family in all of Arxia for this. Claudia seemed to understand what I wanted and held up the palm of her left hand to me as if to say, wait for a little while. Then, she put her hand on her chin and started thinking.

Claudia doesn’t have a close relationship with her family though..... Basically, she has zero contact with them. Her family name probably won’t be of any help.

.....Maybe I should have Earl Terejia help me establish a formal order of knights in Kaldia. I’ve been thinking about something along those lines as of late. There are two types of knights in Arxia, personal knights and those that serve the country. National knights are officially part of the Royal Army, and there are those within the Royal Army that are able to become knights. As for personal knights, nobles with the rank of Earl or higher are allowed to appoint members in their personal armies as knights with the permission of the House of Lords and the church.

But, there are strict restrictions on becoming a knight, only a limited number can be knighted by each noble and they must pass an examination as well. Also, to establish a personal knight order, a minimum of two knights must be selected and pass the examination.

Well, Claudia would probably pass the examination easily. Who should I pick for the other knight, though? In terms of ability, Teomer would be the best choice, but would he be willing? Among the three eastern border domains that received defense funding from the House of Lords, Kaldia is the only domain without its own order of knights. If we request to establish one, it will probably be approved.

I need to discuss this with Earl Terejia and figure out the details.Come to think of it, I discuss everything important with him. This is because I don't have the ability to make decisions by myself yet.

Indeed, if something happens to him, I'll be really troubled. I need to think about what to do just in case something like that happens as well.

CHAPTER 110

A LOT OF UNREST IN THE ROYAL CAPITAL THIS YEAR

Earl Terejia went ahead of me and returned to his own villa in the royal capital, then I arrived at my house in the capital as well.

“Welcome back, Eliza-sama.”

The servants that were hired earlier this spring to take care of the house in my absence all lowered their heads towards me. Since I’m almost never here except when I visit the royal capital each summer, there’s only a bare minimum of servants that help maintain the house.

I don’t have a memory that’s so good that I can remember their names with just their faces alone all at once in our first meeting, so I had all the servants introduce themselves to me and tell me their specific jobs. Since the nobles in the capital don’t care much to know about their servants’ details, I could tell that my servants were quite surprised. To me though, it’s only natural to want to know more about who’s working for me.

Next, I introduced the people I brought along with me to the capital to them. Claudia who was riding in the same carriage as me, Mrs. Marshan who came along in a different carriage, my maids Phoebe and Isadora, as well as the cook Nathan. They’ve been serving me for five years already at my mansion, and I was worried about that this time my stay in the royal capital would be longer than usual and I wouldn’t be used to new servants, so I brought a minimum of servants along with me. The others all stayed behind at the Mansion of Golden Hills.

The people around me haven’t really changed much at all in the last five years. The only servant that left was Mrs. Galton, my first nanny that got fired.

“Sorry for coming on such short notice, but is the study available?”

“Yes, Eliza-sama. Please use it however you like.”

“Then, I’ll take a break there and write some personal things. Please begin preparing dinner as well. Claudia-dono and Mrs. Marshan will be eating with me, so please prepare for three.”

“Yes, Eliza-sama. Understood.”

The elderly man that was employed as a servant here lowered his head towards me in a polite but distant manner. The other new employees didn’t seem like they had much of a welcoming atmosphere either.

Well, since the Kaldia name is synonymous with evil thanks to my family’s actions, this is only to be expected. The Earl had originally only hired those that were unemployed for a low salary anyways. Earl Terejia also hired a female butler as the head of the new servants and to educate the new staff, but of course it’s impossible to train them completely in etiquette in such a short time.

But still, Isadora. Please stop glaring at the new servants like that..... Your smile looks scary, and your eyes aren’t smiling at all. She’s always so warm and friendly to everyone, this is the first time that I’ve ever seen this side of my maid Isadora.

Under the direction of the female butler that Earl Terejia hired, while the new servants weren’t particularly friendly, they still carried out their duties properly. When I entered my study, there wasn’t a speck of dust to be found. This is actually a bit better than I expected.

I went to the desk and took some envelopes and stationary out from the drawer. First I’m going to write a letter to Elise. Just like the previous two years, I’m going to exchange letters with Elise while in the royal capital.

While I’m in the capital, my mansion back in Kaldia will become a rather serene place. I write to Elise so that she won’t get so lonely, even though this year will probably be different for her, but it’s become a habit already.

I wonder if Elise still really needs me to keep writing to her. She now has the maid/attendant Ratoka, the new soldier in training Athrun, and her new playmates Tira and Reka by her side, so telling Elise in a letter that I miss her probably has less of an effect than before.

Even though I usually almost never go to meet her, is something going to change now that Elise probably doesn't need me as much as before? In an attempt to shake off this feeling of unease creeping into my mind, I rubbed my temples with my fingers.

Alright, let's get to writing that letter. First I'll let her know that I arrived safely in the royal capital.

Just like every time I come to the royal capital, my schedule is so full. Even though I arrived just yesterday, I have to attend a scheduled meeting of the House of Lords later today, with no time for me to rest.

When I arrived at the royal Arctoria Palace together with Earl Terejia, just like always, a handsome lord by the name of Margrave Molton found me instantly. I'm impressed with his rugged handsomeness that's been polished by the effects of middle age, honestly. As always, he smiled that innocent smile of his at me, and he bowed to the Earl, causing his elegant silver hair to sway slightly.

"Greetings, Earl Terejia, Viscountess Kaldia. I'm glad to see that both of you seem to be doing well this year, like usual."

"Greetings, Margrave Molton. You look just like how you did last year as well. How is your son doing?"

"Ahh, thanks for asking, he's also in perfect health."

"That's great to hear. Then, I have to get going....."

Margrave Molton and the Earl exchanged polite greetings, then Earl Terejia left me on his own as he went to go find his seat. All of us know already that Margrave Molton is more interested in me than Earl Terejia since he has a son that's the same age as me, so it's already customary that Earl Terejia will go off on his own to let us discuss things each time.

"Greetings, Margrave Molton. Thank you for attending my birthday celebration this year as well."

I bowed slightly deeper than usual on purpose, to let him see the back of my hair for an instant. Earlier this year at my birthday celebration in spring, he had given me a simple hair ornament decorated with a red jewel, which I was now wearing.

For the first time ever since meeting him, I saw an expression of surprise on him, which managed somehow to remain elegant. It seems like a type of innocence, unexpected joy at seeing me wear the ornament he'd given me.

"No, I should be the one thanking you, since I was merely returning the favor as you'd given my son a present for his birthday as well. But I'm really happy to see that you enjoy wearing it. Thank you very much, Viscountess Kaldia."

His eyes seemed like he was looking at me like I was his own daughter, he took my hands and shook them, while my vision began to get slightly blurry. Maybe he'll even pat my head. This is still the House of Lords though, he seemed to recall that it may cause an incident if he is seen patting the head of another noble, even if I am a child, and he looked like he was doing his best to refrain from patting me, clenching and unclenching his fingers.

Just last year I myself learned from the Shiru children the appeal of patting a child on the head, so I can understand his urge. I do have to say, there is an indescribable feeling that comes from being patted on the head, but it does feel nice.

Then, he suddenly started whispering something to me without changing the smiling expression on his face at all –

"The Densel bandit group in the knight headquarters' dungeon was all executed earlier this spring. I'm talking about the members that you caught before."

.....Just where exactly does he get his information from? He just told me some information that even Earl Terejia didn't know, and he just walked off like that to find his own seat like nothing had happened. What's more, he still retained his elegance and handsomeness.

Honestly, I want to copy his elegance and coolness. Although he's a man..... should I really be copying his style. Well, usually I wear knight attire anyways, and I don't think I mind being admired..... It feels like I'm making excuses to myself though.

But anyways, the remainder of that bandit group – well, they were really agents working for Densel – has finally been executed, eh. If they were executed, it means that they were no longer considered useful.

Although there might not be much point, should I see if I can take a look at the knight headquarters' official records? I think there's at least an eighty percent chance that they've been erased from the records, though.

CHAPTER 111

HARASSMENT FROM THE NORDSTURMS

As I expected, the agenda for today's House of Lords meeting began with a discussion about the threat posed by the possible disappearance of the Rindarl Kingdom.

It's located in the center of the four dukedoms to the east, and has deep historical and cultural ties to the other countries that are trying to unite into the Rindarl Union, which carries the same name.

So, of course the Rindarl Union would want to incorporate it into its territory if they succeed in uniting, but as a kingdom, compared to the dukedoms there are major differences between their societies and their laws. The Rindarl Union wouldn't want to forcefully incorporate a country with such deep ties into their new country, as they would have to worry about the political repercussions of doing so.

Since the Rindarl Kingdom is geographically located within the four dukedoms, it's impossible for other countries to interfere in their affairs. Meaning, it's almost certain that the Rindarl Kingdom will likely cease to exist and be incorporated into the new Rindarl Union in some way.

So, to the Arxia Kingdom, what's important to us is the question of when the Rindarl Kingdom will cease to exist, and when our neighbors will officially form the Rindarl Union. After all, it costs a lot of money to constantly have soldiers mobilized for border defense and remain on guard at all times. It's only natural that Arxia would want more accurate information so that it can move only when necessary.

"At any rate, it would be great if we could get more detailed information....."

The nobles were clutching their heads and complaining. Since Arxia of today is an isolationist country, it has too little information about other countries. Our ambassadors and just a few merchants are our only sources of information.

Well, even if we don't open our country's borders, I still think that we should create some sort of spy network, but that's just me. Well, even if we make one now, it'll still be too late to find out the current political situation in Rindarl.

Anyways, a spy network, hmm..... There's no such thing as too much information. Maybe I can set up some sort of spy network using the Kaldia army, it's worth thinking about. No wait, I'd need to think about who even has the talent for this first.

“ – May I say something?”

While the nobles were busy making a fuss and I was getting lost in my daydreams about creating a spy network, a loud and clear voice rang through the hall and caught my attention as well as everyone else's. It's an elderly voice with a low baritone. This voice belongs to a noble that I've been on guard against for the past two years – the major noble of the north and their leader, Marquis Nordsturm.

“.....Yes, of course, go ahead, Marquis Nordsturm.”

The noble who was acting as the moderator for today's House of Lords meeting was obviously surprised for a moment, but quickly regained his composure and gave Marquis Nordsturm permission to address everyone. The entire hall fell silent as if something major had happened.

“I keep hearing everyone say that they would like more information about Rindarl. If everyone is okay with me, I have some personal resources and people I can use in Planates. Maybe I'm overstepping my bounds though, what does everyone think?

.....Eh. He has personal connections in Planates, he says. Wouldn't he also have them in Densel, then? Mentally inside I laughed sarcastically at his arrogance and haughtiness. Since only I have information from the Densel bandit group that he's probably connected somehow to them, anything he says is difficult to believe. Rather than information from Planates, information from Densel on their anti-Arxian terrorist organization would be much more useful, if he were really trying to help Arxia.

“Oh, ohh. Of course, go ahead, that would make everyone feel at ease.”

However, it's definitely true that the Nordsturms are well connected, especially due to the nature of their money lending business. On hearing that he had connections in Planates, the country from the four dukedoms that Arxia has the friendliest relations with, all the nobles gleefully latched on to his proposal. Having skillfully controlled the discussion in the House of Lords, I saw Marquis Nordsturm smile a dark, self-satisfied smirk, then he glanced directly at me for a moment. I saw malice in his eyes directed

straight at me, and an expression as if to say everyone here was a fool beneath him, myself included.



“Then, it is up to you, Viscountess Kaldia. May the god Misorua’s guidance be with you.”

A high-ranking priest from the Arxia church was currently lowering his head towards me. Right after the priest said this, Viscount Ogren who was wearing the Nordsturm emblem on his scarf smiled viciously at me without even attempting to conceal the nasty grin he had on his face.

“.....Yes, I understand. I shall definitely do the best I can.”

I suppressed myself to the best of my abilities, and a surprisingly calm and neutral voice managed to come out of me. I feel like if I look in a mirror though, maybe I can see a throbbing vein that’s about to burst.

I’ve been forced into something troublesome. What’s more, it’s a request from Viscount Ogren. Marquis Nordsturm is almost certainly behind this very troublesome request of his.

After the end of this regular meeting of the House of Lords, I had to participate in a medium-sized dance party with Marquis Nordsturm’s unpleasant smile still fresh on my mind. As the first evening party of the new season, many people were present, and I got a bad premonition when I noticed Viscount Ogren heading in my direction together with a person that looked like a high-ranking church official.

I should have listened to that ominous feeling, and escaped from them while I still had the chance. Now I know all too well just what that malicious expression Marquis Nordsturm had aimed towards me was, as something incredibly troublesome has been forced upon me unexpectedly.

“So they used a high-ranking priest to order you to mediate a dispute between Viscount Ogren’s son and his fiancée, eh. They’ve pressed something so unreasonable onto you.”

While I was busy wallowing in regret at not running at the sight of them, Margrave Molton who had heard the story from Claudia patted me on my shoulder to console me.

“At any rate, even if you escaped tonight, they would still send you an official letter from the church, with the same orders that you can’t refuse. Although, this is still a rather annoying task to receive at an inconvenient time. This is definitely something only dirty and underhanded people will stoop to.”

Margrave Molton dares to say things like that out loud. The “they” that he’s referring to, is of course the Nordsturm faction.

“.....Well, you’re right. Dealing with a sixteen year old girl and her love problem, this is something completely different, even if I am also a girl, I’m only nine years old still, it’s ridiculous to be asking me.”

They even went to the extent of using a high-ranking priest to make this request of me so that I wouldn’t be able to refuse. Since the church has the power to uphold the law, when they ask me like this to help mediate a dispute in order to maintain order, a minor noble like me, a viscountess, has no right to refuse.

Honestly, I’ve been saddled with something so bothersome during this terribly inconvenient period of unrest and turmoil.

“Viscount Ogren’s son’s fiancée is the daughter of the Rogshia family, correct? If it’s the Rogshia family, they’re a noble family from the Greenfield region.”

Claudia was cool as a rock as she listened to our exchange while accompanying me as my maidservant, and she finally inserted herself into our conversation, letting me know about the fiancée’s background. As for the nobles in the Greenfield region, isn’t that the place where people ignore women’s opinions and wills almost entirely? That’s where my fired former nanny, Mrs. Galton was from. At such a busy time, I now have to go talk to a girl who was probably never brought up to think for herself for all her life, and change her heart. How meaningless. For women from that region, she probably had an upbringing where she always had to listen to anything and everything her father and grandfather had to say.

“.....Anyways, for the time being we must set up a meeting with the daughter of the Rogshia family. Hopefully Earl Terejia can give me some advice as well.”

CHAPTER 112

CLAUDIA'S PROMISE

“Hey, you, isn’t that Claudia?”

Right after I got saddled with something annoying due to the Nordstürms’ harassment, I heard a loud booming voice coming from beside us as I discussed things with Claudia and Margrave Molton. When I turned to see who the owner of the voice was, I saw a head of honey blonde hair glittering in the sunlight like a chandelier. He’s a young man with a cool demeanor that has gray eyes the color of stone, I could tell right away by his appearance that he’s definitely related to Claudia in some way. He’s almost certainly a close relative of hers.

“Older brother!?”

With Claudia’s surprised voice, now I knew for certain that this person was her older brother. Looks like I was right on the mark. Comparing the two of them, they definitely appeared so similar to each other.

“What are you doing here?”

“That’s what I should be saying, Claudia. Today’s party organizer is one of the leaders of the Knight Order, didn’t you know?”

“I’m only attending as the personal attendant of a noble today..... I see now. That’s why there were so many of my distant Rolentsor relatives at the party today.”

Margrave Molton seemed to be interested as he watched the siblings greet each other. It seems that since the Rolentsors are a military family, they don’t like to go to most social gatherings. Indeed, other than Claudia, I don’t know anyone from the Rolentsor family at all.

“Then, is the one next to you your current master, Claudia?”

“Ahh, she’s Eliza-do..... Eliza-sama, sorry for the late introduction, but allow me to introduce my brother to you.”

She didn't call me Eliza-dono like she always did, maybe she suddenly remembered that we were in public and she hurriedly corrected herself and used a more polite term. Maybe he's used to seeing such things from Claudia, her brother just smiled wryly. I nodded at Claudia and she breathed in relief, as I exchanged knowing glances with her brother.

"Eliza-sama, this is my older brother, Nathaniel Rolentsor. Older brother, this person is Lord Eliza Kaldia, my current master."

.....Ohh, she managed to say all that without stuttering. She's not very used to using polite speech and she probably has butterflies in her stomach right now, but as expected she can do it when she tries. She was able to perfectly introduce Nathaniel and I to each other in a ladylike manner.

"Pleased to meet you, Lord Kaldia. I'm Nathaniel, Claudia's older brother. I work in the royal capital's military police. It's an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Pleased to meet you as well, Nathaniel-dono. Thank you for taking care of your sister before this."

I was going to bow to him, but Nathaniel suddenly stuck his right hand out at me. With a bit of confusion, I shook his hand. Then, with a wry smile on his face, Margrave Molton interrupted us.

"Nathaniel-dono, I believe that your sister's master is a lady."

"Eh?Ah!!"

While I was surprised just now that he shook hands with me, Nathaniel seemed even more shocked right now, and he swiftly let go of my hand. In Arxia it's the custom for men to shake hands with each other, while boys and girls are expected to keep more of a distance from the other gender during a first introduction. Due to the way I dress, he must have mistook me for a boy.

"S, sorry..... To think that I was so rude to a lady."

"No, I don't mind at all. I prefer to dress like this. I don't mind being treated according to my clothes, either."

Boys and girls are just supposed to simply greet each other on a first introduction. I felt sorry for Nathaniel who was apologizing for treating me like a boy because of how I dressed, so I told him the truth that I didn't mind.



We got some drinks from the party, and everyone's calmed down and relaxed a bit. Nathaniel apologized to me once more, and I calmly and politely told him again that I didn't mind, then he started speaking to Claudia again.

"By the way, Claudia. Shouldn't you be handing in your resignation to Eliza-sama soon? Are you still going to continue on like this?"

Both Claudia and I were wide-eyed in surprise at his sudden question. Only Margrave Molton was able to keep a cool smile on his face as he watched us with interest in his eyes.

"Eh, what are you talking about?"

"You don't even know what I'm talking about..... Hey, you, didn't you make a promise with father? If you aren't able to become a knight by the time you turn twenty, you'll return home and listen to his orders?"

".....Ahh!"

As if she just remembered something, Claudia smacked her fist into her hand. That's not the reaction I want from her though! She's forgotten such an important thing? Although I probably shouldn't criticize her for it. Now that I think back on it, she told me about this several years ago when I first met her, but I'd completely forgotten about it as well. I had just been thinking about creating a knight order in Kaldia, but I had thought that I'd be able to take my time. Now I have to establish a knight order as fast as possible, so that Claudia won't be taken away from me.

Honestly, this is the worst time possible for me to be saddled with an annoying burden by the Nordsturms!

Even though I was mentally screaming inside, I also started calculating and planning out what I could do as quickly as I could in order to create my knight order. And of

course, Claudia would pick at this moment to go off completely on another tangent and interrupt me.

“Eliza-sama, is it alright if I go and greet the hosts of this party tonight!? I want to see if I can ask to become a knight! No wait, I won’t ask them to make me a knight, I just want permission to take the test!!”

“.....Wait, wait, calm down, Claudia. You’re getting overly excited. Besides, you’re only a noble’s personal attendant. You don’t have the status to go and greet someone so high-ranked, please don’t try it.”

“No way!”

Claudia was tightly gripping the hems of her dress, and she seemed like she was almost about to fly out of here. I prepared myself mentally to talk to her about this, now just how to do the persuasion.

I absolutely can’t have a confrontation with Claudia in front of Nathaniel. If he reports it to their parents, it might be that Claudia will be forced to leave me even sooner. When I glanced over at Nathaniel uneasily, he was grinning like a cat, a smile that looked just like his sister’s, and it looked like he was having fun watching us discuss things.

“.....You guys get along so well for servant and master. I’m glad that you were able to meet a master that complements you so well. You’ve even managed to remember her name properly.”

This comment from him hit me hard. All my feelings, that I can’t get in order, that are going out of control. Undoubtedly, Claudia’s older brother can see how we get along.

Margrave Molton who was watching all this from behind us seemed to be chuckling with that wry smile of his stuck to his face all this time, while I just felt incredibly tired from everything.

CHAPTER 113

DISCUSSION ABOUT ESTABLISHING A KNIGHT ORDER

I finally left the evening party and met up with Earl Terejia in a horse-drawn carriage, and immediately consulted him about setting up a knight order. Claudia was too embarrassed about having forgotten her promise to her father that she didn't join our discussion and was riding on another carriage instead, and Bellway was here instead to have another person in the discussion.

"What's this. You forgot this issue about Claudia-dono? A mistake due to inexperience."

After I explained the situation to Earl Terejia, he seemed surprised for a moment, then his expression became very strict. Although I did expect his disappointment, I'm still a bit embarrassed that I caused him to be disappointed in me.

"Yes, my apologies."

"Eliza. Taking care of nobles from other families is a serious responsibility. It's important to know each person's circumstances. Remember it well."

"I'll deeply engrave it into my mind.Sorry for the inconvenience, Earl. Bellway, my apologies."

Honestly, even if the Earl didn't tell me, I know that I've made a huge blunder. Claudia had promised her father that if she wasn't able to become a knight by the age of 20, that she would return home and get married to whoever he wishes, and she's 19 right now. I definitely do recall her telling me this before when I met her a few years ago. And yet, I still managed to forget it.

I could feel the blood draining from my face so I lowered my head, and this time I noticed that Bellway seemed surprised as well. Well, come to think of it, we've had our disagreements. And now, I've gone and done something so unreliable. Of course he would be surprised as well, I started feeling even more down.

"Eliza-sama....."

Bellway uttered my name with a slightly bitter tone of voice. I couldn't help but raise my head again as a conditioned reflex. Now I'm deeply regretting the rift between us, the harsh things I've said to him before and how I've hurt him with my words.

I've never apologized even once to him in the last three years. And honestly, even now, I don't know how I should go about it.

A momentary silence fell upon us. Maybe Earl Terejia wanted to stop the awkwardness, he picked up the conversation again.

"Please raise your head. Anyways, we have to make a plan for establishing a knight order immediately."

".....Yes."

"While I can apply for the establishment of a knight order for you, have you thought about the reason you'll give for needing one?"

"Yes. I'll say that they're for protecting and being in charge of the new citizens, to help them get adjusted."

".....Mmm."

For personal knight orders, they are required to have a meaning to their existence and have actual work to do. The military's role is to maintain order and defend the territory, but they can't be in charge of the new citizens. The soldiers in the army are also recruited from ordinary citizens, so their social status is equal to that of commoners.

However, being knighted by a noble for their personal knight order will raise the rank and social status of the knight as well as confer noble status. Meaning, knighting someone is a noble's way of giving people promotions, and it also allows knights to help do work that only nobles are allowed to do. Only nobles with a rank of earl or higher can create knight orders though, so Earl Terejia will have to lend me his assistance.

"To create a knight order, you need to have at least two qualified knights, though."

"Claudia and..... Teomer Terit from the Shiru tribe, is who I was considering."

The Earl seemed a little lost at who Teomer was, but I really couldn't think of anyone else as a candidate so I said Teo's name in the end, and as expected, the Earl's expression turned strict.

"Teomer, eh.But, it'll be for the best if you don't use a foreigner to help create your knight order."

"As I expected, it was like that."

"The House of Lords probably wouldn't approve of it."

Teomer is a new citizen himself, and the knight order's establishment is meant to protect and take charge of the new citizens. Well, he can be added as a later member with no problems, but it seems that if he's used as a founding member, my application for a knight order probably won't get approved.

".....Then, how about myself?"

Although a person can't be both a knight and the same person that the knights are sworn to serve, technically speaking this knight order will be created to serve Earl Terejia, so on paper there should be no problem if I become a knight as well. Usually the domain lord will become the master of their own knight order, but since my rank isn't high enough, I have to use the Earl's name and higher rank.

As for the test to become a knight, more important than combat capability is knight etiquette, that is to say, knowledge of how to behave similar to and around nobles. That's why nobles themselves are always the most common to become knights. Also, there's no restrictions on gender or age. I think that I should be able to pass it as well.

Well, that's what I thought, but this time Bellway shook his head with furrowed eyebrows as he shot down my plan.

"It's forbidden for there to be any sort of master-servant relationship between a guardian and his ward."

".....Ahh, that's probably true."

I suppose that even my idea wasn't a blind spot in the rules after all. Since Earl Terejia is still my guardian right now, I won't be able to become his knight.

But in that case, I don't have any ideas about any other qualified candidates. What should I do..... Should I ask Bellway who's very experienced in serving nobles to do it? Although he's not nobility himself, he's completely accustomed to being around nobility. And since he was qualified to become the Earl's secretary, he's probably still the distant relative of some noble family, just not closely related enough to have noble status, this seems to be likely.

I kept glancing at Bellway while thinking this idea over, but the more I thought about it, the more unlikely I felt it was that Bellway would become a knight. If he had wanted noble status in the first place, he would have joined as a knight long ago, instead of remaining as a commoner and becoming the Earl's secretary. So, he probably wouldn't be interested and his combat capabilities are questionable.

Once again, I lamented the lack of educated people in Kaldia. Right now we're still focused on just raising the basic quality of life in Kaldia to get closer to the average in Arxia, and I have no resources to use on cultivating future useful personnel. I don't have any idea right now, either.

".....I have someone that might work."

Even though he still had a strict expression, this time the Earl offered up a suggestion.

"You have someone in mind?"

It was so unexpected to hear the Earl having a candidate, that I couldn't help but lose control over my expression and my mouth was wide agape for a moment. The Earl nodded to me in return, and this time he asked me a question in turn.

"Yep. I only have one candidate, but he's still a candidate. He's someone that's not related to Kaldia at all though, is that okay with you?"

A person that's not related to Kaldia at all, eh..... Well, since the knight order is technically Earl Terejia's, the members don't need to be related to Kaldia, it's okay if they're related to him as well. But since the reason for my knight order's existence is to protect and take charge of the new citizens, I need to judge for myself what kind of person this candidate is.

"Then, who do you have in mind?"

“My grandnephew. He’s the grandson of my half-sister who was born from a concubine, so he’s a Terejia without noble status. You should have met him once before.”

I was very confused at him saying I should have met him before. Other than Marquis Rittergau, I don’t recall ever being introduced to any of Earl Terejia’s relatives before.

“.....I’m very sorry, but when and where was I introduced to him before, I’m afraid that I can’t recall.”

“No, he was never introduced to you. You should have met him at Fort Jugfena.”

“At Fort Jugfena.....?”

I’d met so many people at Fort Jugfena, was one of the Earl’s relatives among them? However, when I thought back to my days at Fort Jugfena, I still couldn’t remember who he was.

“He was the one riding on the red-winged draconis.”

“.....Ah!”

When he mentioned this, I instantly remembered. When Claudia and Kamil had arrived at Fort Jugfena and saved me, there had been two draconis, and there was a person I didn’t know who was riding together with Claudia. *(TL note: Chapter 51, there was a character that was described, but never introduced or mentioned again until now.)*

I recall that he was a young man who looked quite similar to Earl Terejia if the Earl was younger. I had originally planned on asking about who he was, but then I lost myself sleeping for an entire month and ended up forgetting about it.

“His name is Oscar Terejia, and he’s nineteen years old just like Claudia. Right now he’s an apprentice to Earl Einsbark’s eldest son, but since he’s still a Terejia despite not having noble status, he hasn’t been allowed to go on the front lines in the Jugfena knight order. He’s burning for an opportunity to prove himself.”

“I see, got it.”

“Would you like to meet him officially?”

“Of course. I’m deeply grateful to you for introducing him to me.”

CHAPTER 114

ASKING ONCE AGAIN

I immediately began the process necessary for preparing the documents for the upcoming arrival of the person critical to establishing my knight order, Oscar Terejia. My knight order application needs to go to the central office of the Royal Army's headquarters stationed in the capital and I must submit some fees as well. Their office is also quite a grand place to behold.

"I'm here on behalf of Earl Terejia. Please give me the necessary documents in order to apply for a knight order."

Bellway had taken me here today and was over at the next window, taking care of what we came here to do, but since we went to the trouble of coming to the knight headquarters, I might as well investigate some other things also.

"I would also like to ask a question. I may have heard a rumor that the bandits caught in my Kaldia domain have been executed."

"A bandit group, you say..... Oh, Kaldia domain? Could you be, Viscountess Kaldia.....?"

The knight at the window who was talking to me had a tired, bored voice. I couldn't help but furrow my eyebrows at his lack of manners. What have things come to if a knight working in the main headquarters has an attitude like this, sigh.

I managed to hear the knight saying the word "torture....." to himself quietly under his breath as he looked through some documents. My ears may be better than I expected.

"W, what business do you have knowing these matters? The, the methods used to obtain information from them are classified as top secret. Where they are and what happened to them is also top secret."

".....Maybe you've misunderstood something. I would merely like to see the unclassified public documents available about the information learned from the bandits."

"Oh, ohh, ahh, the public documents."

While still talking so slowly like a sloth, the knight got the public documents for me. I think that this knight probably thinks I'm a torture maniac or something. I wonder if he's seen the scars I left on the bandit group for himself.

"Okay, here you are, the public documents available about the bandit group."

I took the folder of documents he gave to me, and swiftly scanned through them. As I expected, I didn't see Marquis Nordsturm's name anywhere, but I did see a low-ranking northern noble's name, Viscount Garmstead. Maybe it was impossible for him to hide all connections entirely, and this is just a scapegoat? Either way, I carved Viscount Garmstead's name into my memory, then I returned the documents to the knight.

"Thank you."

"Oh, sure."

As I returned the documents, the knight immediately filed them away again. His expression didn't seem to have fear or curiosity, only boredom, and I decided to leave the window before I heard something unnecessary again.

"Oh, my my. What a coincidence, I never would have thought that I'd meet you here, Viscountess Kaldia."

Suddenly, a raspy voice greeted me. What a place to meet him in.

".....Greetings, Viscount Ogren."

"Hmph, I can't say that I'm feeling all too well right now. Unlike some barbarians, I prefer to avoid this type of place whenever possible."

I merely laughed mentally at Viscount Ogren who was guffawing like an idiot. I don't know what he's here for, but his words have already revealed that he must be here for something that only he personally can do since he hates being here so much.

"By the way, Viscountess Kaldia. How are things going with my request from several days ago?"

"I've gotten in contact with the Rogshia family."

“I see. That means, you still haven’t met their daughter yourself? Just what are you doing, you haven’t even met the person herself to take care of the problem!”

Viscount Ogren seemed quite surprised, while I simply stared at him coldly in return. Maybe he was irritated that I would stand up to him, he gave me a look that said he was bored with me.

“Well, I hope you’ll take care of things soon.”

He said that as if he had to get the last word in as I continued on my way. Although I must wonder, since he’s still a noble, is it really okay for him to reveal his emotions and thoughts so easily like that. He seems so easy to take advantage of. Well, he’s just a disposable pawn.

But just for the sake of harassing me, Marquis Nordsturm wouldn’t dispose of this pawn on purpose, would he. He’s definitely inconvenienced me at a time when I should be busy with other matters, but I think that would be careless of him.

“I’ve returned.Eliza-sama, what are you been doing?”

Bellway returned with documents in hand when he noticed me just standing there tilting my head while thinking.

“Oh, nothing in particular. You’re finished?”

“Yes. I’ve received all the necessary documents.”

“Then let’s go back to Earl Terejia’s place. Time is of the essence.”



“Tea party?”

“Yep. There’s an invitation from the Rogshia family to see if you would like to meet their daughter officially at a tea party.”

“Is their daughter coming to the royal capital?”

“She’s already here, as a first-year student in noble school.”

Ahh, I nodded in understanding. So this means that next year will be Feria Rogshia's coming of age ceremony and debut party.

In Arxia, people are considered adults at 16, and officially enter social circles then. Well, only those from the royal family or duke's families are able to be well-connected instantly upon reaching adulthood, but it's still a necessary process for all nobles.Or to say, it's basically a necessity for nobles to attend all sorts of these social events. That's why even though I'm not an adult yet, I still need to attend so many of these as well.

"Has a date been decided?"

"Not yet."

"Then..... How about leaving it to Bellway?"

"If that's what you want to do."

I nodded to Earl Terejia, while also catching Bellway's look of surprise in the corner of my eye as he stood in the corner of the room. Then I turned around and faced Bellway directly.

"Bellway, can I leave it up to you to arrange the date?"

"Eliza-sama....."

Bellway looked back and forth between Earl Terejia and myself with a confused expression. I don't know what the Earl's expression was though, I couldn't see his face from here.

Bellway coughed slightly, then he looked straight at me again.

".....Of course. Thank you, for leaving it up to me."

"No, thank you instead. I'll trust you to do it, Bellway."

CHAPTER 115

OSCAR TEREJIA

Bellway scheduled with the Rogshia family that our small tea party would take place soon, in the middle of the seventh month in this world. But before that meeting took place, a young man from Fort Jugfena came to visit me. He was Oscar Terejia, Earl Terejia's grandnephew, and the person that I was going to request become my knight.

Upon meeting him formally for the first time, I started out by apologizing to him for welcoming him in my house which was only a small townhouse. Now that I've met him again, just like I remembered, his strict gaze really does remind me of Earl Terejia, I think anyone meeting him for the first time would easily get nervous.

"Thank you for coming, Oscar-dono. This is our first time being introduced to each other. Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Eliza Kaldia. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, you must be tired from your journey, coming all the way from Fort Jugfena."

"No, it's my honor to be summoned by you, Viscountess Kaldia. I've heard that you need some founding members for your knight order that you're establishing, so I've come all this way to speak to you."

Much like his appearance, he seems to be the serious type, and his first greeting to me was rather stuffy and formal. Behind it all I could sense that he was slightly nervous, but because of that I felt a sense of kinship with him.

"There's no need to be so formal with me. As you can see, I'm just a child."

I opened my palms to him as if I was playing, and Oscar's eyes widened for an instant, then he smiled slightly like he just saw something funny. It also feels like his shoulders have loosened up a little.

"As you wish."

I pulled a chair over for him, and he sat down with a much more relaxed air about him than when he entered the room. I'm relieved that he seems to understand and get along with me so far. Since he's going to be someone that I may have to interact with

quite often in the future, in both Kaldia and social circles, it's for the best that we get along.

"I'll get right to the point, and explain more in detail about my knight order. Earl Terejia is setting it up for me in his name, and the purpose of the knight order will be to protect and take charge of the new citizens in my doain."

"My granduncle is setting it up in his name?"

"My noble rank isn't high enough.Only earls and higher are allowed to create their own knight orders."

I only remembered after I already said it that it's not common knowledge that a higher noble rank is required to set up a knight order, so I hurriedly explained for his benefit. Because I'm receiving both a noble education and a domain lord's education, sometimes I forget the differences in what's taught in each.

I'm going to appear in social circles in the future as well, but I have to remember to keep the conversation topics appropriate for whoever I'm speaking to.From now on I need to be more careful.

"But doesn't that make my grand-uncle a higher rank and have all the power instead of you, the lord of the domain who's supposed to rule the populace?"

"No, it's fine. He's my official guardian, and because I'm still a minor, he's allowed to take care of my domain lord duties for me. Also, I have to submit my consent as well when he applies for various things."

"I see....."

It was only a simple explanation, but Oscar was already nodding in understanding. He learns quickly, how excellent.

"Although, I should note that the knight order's actual task will be to carry out my objectives."

".....What type of objectives do you have in mind, do you already know?"

"Of course. The first thing that I must accomplish is, the new citizens can actually supervise themselves sufficiently through using the old system."

“Doesn’t that..... go against the social hierarchy?”

The social hierarchy in Arxia is, as interpreted from a section of the Sacred Code, commoners are not allowed to govern commoners, and must be governed by nobility. If there’s a difference in status among the commoners, it’s considered a threat to the governing method of our country. Of course he would be puzzled, so I shook my head and answered him.

“The old system that I’m referring to is where people will have to sign contracts with me as my vassals. They will simply be communicating my will to the other new citizens.”

Of course, the country won’t stand for anything that strains the current social hierarchy too much. The domain lords have the right to appoint the mayor for each village, and the entire right to command the soldiers recruited entirely from commoners lies solely with the domain lord as well. Of course, everyone knows that there are some unavoidable exceptions. That’s why formally encoded in our kingdom’s laws, nobles are also allowed to offer commoners contracts to become vassals. A vassal is defined as someone who serves their lord, and their primary job is to mediate between the lord and the citizens.

In the past maybe the leader of the domain’s army and the domain lord would have been separate positions, but now after many years of passing down positions through hereditary bloodlines, they’re now one and the same. Although knights were also a type of vassal to begin with, after a long period of time it also became a special position that conferred noble status, so it’s changed into something else as well over time.

“Ahh, vassals..... I see.”

“Eventually, I would like to have all the leaders of the Shiru tribe become members of my knight order. They still lack knowledge about Arxia, but they’re in the process of learning and will definitely be useful in the future.”

I also told Oscar very simply that I needed the knight order established as fast as possible for the sake of human resources. He probably knows this already, as he just nodded without asking me questions about this.

“Although the real reasons aren’t necessarily praiseworthy, on the surface the knight order is still going to be in charge of supervising and protecting the new citizens. Most of the new citizens only speak the Artolan or Rindarl languages, and of course they’re

not literate either, so they don't know how to read or write. I'd like to do something about this. Also, about their protection. For when it'll be necessary, their defenses will need to be expanded."

"Do you mean to try at increasing our defenses to cover our entire border?"

"Your thought process is excellent."

I could feel the corners of my lips raising up. Capable personnel are highly welcomed.

Anyways, I've been talking so much that I've gotten thirsty. I rang a bell and gave instructions to the maid waiting outside the room to prepare tea for us. Then, for some reason, Oscar must have found something funny as he chuckled.

".....What is it?"

"Nothing. It's just..... Even though you're still so small, you seem like such a splendid noble."

Oh, so he's saying that my words and actions don't fit my age. I nodded, and told him not to worry about it. This is a much better reaction from him than something like getting scared or disgusted, at any rate.

CHAPTER 116

TROUBLESOME GIRL

There are eight different gates in the royal capital that connect the nobles' district with the commoners' district. In the center is the royal palace, then eight streets spread out from it like the spokes of a wheel, forming the noble district, and the gates are on the outside edges.

My townhouse happens to be in the vicinity of the southeast gate, and the Rogshia family's residence that I've been invited to today is close to the south gate. We're closer neighbors than I expected, but unfortunately there's many streets that aren't wide enough for carriages, so I had to ride there myself by horse.

Since I'm riding a horse, I put on my usual knight attire. Riding clothes for women in Arxia haven't been developed yet, and wearing some formal dresses or skirts would range from impossible to incredibly inconvenient for riding. For maids and teachers, their clothes are softer and easier to move about in for the sake of their jobs, but clothes for nobles are so heavy and difficult to move around in. Honestly, it's really so inconvenient..... I'll just wear what I like instead.

"Well, aren't we feeling quite casual today, Viscountess Lady Kaldia."

And the result is, the servants of the Rogshia family got such a negative first impression of me. The Rogshia noble family is from the Greenfield region, which is a bit backwards in regards to women's social standings. While Arxia is a bit slightly patriarchal, Greenfield exaggerates this to another level entirely.

So they insulted me with sarcasm, and I thought back to my time with Mrs. Galton. I must say though, it's unbecoming to get angry over this degree of snubbing, so I slowly and elegantly tilted my head.

"This is formal wear according to the law, is there a problem?"

"This isn't an official venue like the House of Lords. Don't you think that it would be polite for women to wear clothes that make them look like women?"

“Since I’m meeting your master for the first time, I believe that it would actually be more polite for me to wear such formal attire.”

Has he already run out of words to counter me with, the male servant just stood there silently with a look of annoyance. Behind me, I could hear Claudia who was wearing maid attire doing her best and failing to muffle her sounds of laughter. Since she’s a girl that wants to become a knight despite her gender, of course she would also be against such fixed ideas about gender.

The servant guided us into the Rogshia family residence, and on my way I only saw male servants inside. Even the work that maids would normally do, male servants were performing instead. It seems that rather than disdaining work that some would think are supposed to be left for females, they think it’s more important for women to not work at all. They must be very rigid in their beliefs.

“Master, Viscountess Lady Kaldia has arrived.”

“Ahh, welcome and thank you so much for coming, Lord Kaldia.”

The servant guided us to a reception room with a large window that allowed the room to be brightly illuminated. Outside the window I could see a garden, and the room was nice and warm thanks to the unobstructed sunshine.

“Thank you very much for inviting me today.”

“Not at all, I should be the one apologizing, troubling you to come all the way over here for my family’s troubles.”

Viscount Rogshia had a soft smile, and his age showed through the many white hairs on his head, he seems to be a gentle person despite the atmosphere of this residence. When I took a seat, he immediately had his daughter, the problem child in person, called over.

Compared to the servants’ attitudes, there’s a startling discrepancy with how agreeable Viscount Rogshia seems to be. It’s a strange and unsettling feeling.

“.....Father, you called for me?”

His daughter showed up soon after she was called for. She has light blue hair, which appeared almost transparent when bathed in the sunlight from the window. I think

that she's quite a cute girl. I know that she's supposed to be 15 years old, but she has her father's gentle demeanor, and looks younger than her age.

"Lord Kaldia. This is my daughter, Feria."

While putting his hand gently on her shoulder, Viscount Rogshia introduced his daughter to me. Maybe she didn't expect to be introduced to a child much younger than she was, there was a look of confusion on her face.

"Feria, this is Lord Kaldia. Go ahead and give your greetings."

"O, okay. My name is Feria Rogshia, Lord Kaldia....."

Although she stuttered a little, her voice was clear. She looked directly at me, and I could tell she had a strong will. I sensed that she was probably the lively, active type of girl rather than quiet and obedient, and I mentally sighed.

Her father seems to be a calm and gentle person, and at least he doesn't seem adhere to the special customs of the Greenfield region just yet. Feria is probably a similar type to Claudia, the most difficult for me to deal with.

".....My name is Eliza Kaldia. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Honestly, how annoying. Even if Feria doesn't want to be engaged to Viscount Ogren's son and wants to cancel the engagement, my job is to negotiate Feria into accepting the engagement somehow, but it won't be easy with her father's personality that probably lets Feria do whatever she wants.

Once again, I cursed the northern nobles that thrust such a troublesome matter onto me.

CHAPTER 117

NOT WHAT I EXPECTED

I got saddled with such a bothersome task in the first place all because Feria didn't want to get married to Viscount Ogren's son. For Viscount Ogren who's taken up the task of inconveniencing me, and Marquis Nordsturm who's probably the one behind everything pulling the strings, this headstrong girl must have been a perfect opportunity for them to keep me busy elsewhere.

Feria was sitting next to Viscount Rogshia in a ladylike manner, and seemed to be quietly observing me. Well, she probably doesn't know the reason that I'm here yet. I don't know the specific circumstances yet, but either way, she wants to break her engagement, and I'm here to stop her from doing that despite her wishes. If she knows my goal, maybe she'll be on guard against me.

Well, what should I do. How do I hear Feria's story from her without raising her guard?

First, maybe I can use a safer topic, like the relations between the various lords, to try and probe about her circumstances. I looked at Viscount Rogshia who was smiling calmly, Feria who wasn't trying to hide her look of confusion, and Claudia who was waiting for me in the corner of the room. What story should I use to break the ice?

My attention was suddenly attracted to a sight outside the window. In the garden that I could see through the large window, some seasonal flowers were swaying in the wind. It was a breathtaking sight, the colors and brilliance.

"The Renvia flowers this year have really blossomed so nicely. Last year we planted the red and yellow varieties, but this year the flowers have mixed their colors, so it's quite something to behold."

It seems that Viscount Rogshia noticed my momentary lapse of attention, as he introduced the flowers to me. Although this isn't a topic about the nobles that I was going to use, it's still something nice and easy to begin with.

"Ahh, Renvia flowers. You have such a wonderful garden, a lot of work must have gone into it."

The Renvia is a type of plant with a spiral-shaped flower. While it's very effective at brightening any garden, since its colors are so vivid, it's rather difficult strike a balance and find complementary colors. The garden in this mansion's backyard has at least ten different types of flowers blossoming simultaneously. I wonder if they have a truly skilled gardener here.

"Yes, I'm glad that you enjoy it so much.Feria, how about you give Viscountess Kaldia a tour of the garden?"

At the urging of Viscount Rogshia, Feria agreed to guide me through the garden and she stood up gracefully.For just a moment, I saw a sparkling accessory on top of silken stockings around her thin ankle.

-Ahh, this is really going to be quite troublesome.

Somehow, I managed to suppress my inner emotions somehow, and didn't let them show on my face. In Greenfield, unmarried girls that haven't come of age yet aren't supposed to have metal accessories. This has been a long tradition in this area.

Even though that's supposed to be the case, I definitely saw a flash of silver on Feria's ankle.

Well, this probably means that this girl is having some sort of love affair with someone else even though she has a fiance. This is considered absolutely no good.

"Lord, Kaldia-sama?"

Feria was looking at me confusedly and there was hesitation in her voice. She was also holding out her left arm towards me as if she expected me to escort her, and I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I looked directly at her hand, then met her eyes. I ignored her arm that she held out for me to take.

".....Alright, I'll leave it up to you to show me the garden, Feria-sama."

An icy look appeared in Feria's eyes for just an instant. It seems that because I called her name so directly, she probably considered me rude. She's definitely mistaken about my gender. For boys and girls that meet each other for the first time, they would almost never call each other by the first name unless there's a huge age gap between them. Especially in an annoying place like Greenfield with such backwards ideas about gender, these gender customs will be even more rigidly enforced.

“Um.....!”

“Yes, what is it?”

“.....E, escort.”

“I’m already nine years old, and I can walk by myself so there’s no need for an escort.”

My sarcasm was clearly irritating Feria and her face was turning red, so I snuck a look at her father, Viscount Rogshia. He still remained the same as always, with a calm and gentle expression on his face.

This is bad, is what I was thinking inside. If only I had investigated more about Viscount Rogshia. Just in case, if he doesn’t happen to be someone from Greenfield originally, all the plans that I had thought up would be wasted. Even though I took all the trouble of learning the terrible sexist customs and habits of the Greenfield region’s nobles, if the person I’m really dealing with, Viscount Rogshia, isn’t familiar with Greenfield customs, everything I learned will have been for naught, I can’t use my original plans.

“That’s not it, you should be escorting me. You said you’re nine already, right?”

“Oh, my apologies. I’m very sorry about the confusion, but I happen to be a Viscountess, a girl. I didn’t take your hand out of the consideration that we would appear to be getting too close to each other for our first meeting.”

Unusually for Claudia, I could hear her sighing from behind me. She’s probably sighing because I’ve gotten off to such a bad start with one of the primary people I’m dealing with.

“.....Girl, viscountess?”

Feria was absolutely frozen in shock with her mouth wide agape, and I confirmed to myself that I was right about her having mistook my gender. Well, Viscountesses are rare to begin with in Arxia, and it definitely wouldn’t be allowed at all in the Greenfield region.

“-But, then, those clothes.....”

She finally managed to squeeze out a silly-sounding higher pitched voice than usual from that brain of hers which must be in so much confusion right now. In her eyes, apart from confusion, I could see that there was another, more complex emotion flickering about.

It was probably, jealous envy. She didn't feel sorry for me, nor was she disgusted with me, she wanted freedom like me, and once again I sighed in my mind.

The more I observe, the less Feria seems like anything a girl from the Greenfield region should be like. In this mansion, every servant is just like everything I've heard about Greenfield, with just about everything excluding women. The only people that don't match, are Viscount Rogshia and his daughter Feria.

Honestly, this is such a bother.

CHAPTER 118

RENVIA BLACK TEA

For the time being, since I've achieved my objective today of meeting Feria, I toured their garden for long enough to be polite, then excused myself and made my leave of the Rogshia residence as soon as I could.

Viscount Rogshia and his daughter Feria are the complete opposite of all Greenfield customs. Thanks to all the strange contrasting things within the Rogshia mansion, I know now that I lack too much information.

First, that sparkling accessory I saw on Feria's ankle accidentally – this is such a great piece of information that fell into my lap. I can already guess at why Feria wants to cancel her engagement to Viscount Ogren's son.

What it means is, Feria most likely has someone that she's seeing romantically right now. And, she probably wants to get married to that person instead. That's why she has to break the engagement on purpose.

It's all very simple to understand. But, anything related to feelings is complex to deal with, and I also felt rather angry inside.

Marriages between nobles aren't made just for mere status. While they are sometimes made for alliance purposes or power struggles, it's mostly about trade.

To go on a bit of a tangent, merchants in Arxia don't hold all that much power. This is because most of the largest transactions are directly conducted between domain lords. When I arranged for the new citizens to get critical supplies such as food and materials from other domains, since most of these products can't be produced in Kaldia on a large scale, Earl Terejia and I basically bought the products directly from other domain lords, before distributing them to my citizens.

The largest merchants don't have power because, they mostly deal in luxury and high-class goods, so their customers are almost exclusively nobles, and they're kept completely under control by the nobility. Even the Sacred Code, our law system, decrees that regulating imports and exports is part of the domain lord's work. This is

probably all to prevent some merchants from disrupting the country's balance if they have too much money and power.

Alright, back to the main topic.

One of the most convenient methods for doing trade between domains is to arrange a marriage. In the Greenfield region, it's common for daughters to get engaged early, but on the other hand, it's also known to be common to break engagements if someone comes along with better conditions.

By the way, since this time I've formally had to accept a request from Viscount Ogren, I'm forced to take his side and actively work to preserve the engagement. It will be a big problem if I'm seen to promote breaking the engagement instead.

Engaged families are also formally treated as relatives. There are various benefits to this, such as lower tariffs between the two domains, and relaxing restrictions on goods that are only allowed to be brought across domains in limited number.

This is why the church went out of its way to order me to preserve this engagement. Their trade involves daily necessities, so if the engagement is canceled, it may directly impact some citizens negatively if they can't get enough goods, and the church's role is to preserve order.

I'm angry because, Feria's already at an age where she's almost about to graduate from noble school, and she's still ignoring all these things for her own selfishness and trying to break her engagement.

While it's clear to see that Viscount Ogren's request to me is entirely meant to harass me more than anything else, and that he's a nasty character, still. This engagement affects a great number of citizens' lives in both domains.

Domain lords' income mostly come from taxes in their own domains. And I don't know the specifics in this situation, but whenever an engagement is decided, usually it will come with many trade benefits for the citizens. And yet, this girl whose food, clothes, and shelter all come from the people's taxes, she's prioritizing her own love interests over that of her people's well-being?

Well, I still don't know the full story yet though, so I shouldn't be getting angry just yet, maybe I'm making a mistake.

Viscount Rogshia's behavior really caught my attention. Of course I told him in advance what reason I was visiting him and Feria for. He also knows very well that I was requested by the Ogres to mediate, so that the engagement can be preserved. And yet, he just lets Feria do whatever she wants. From what I saw today though, Feria probably doesn't know anything. She doesn't know the consequences of breaking her engagement, nor does she know why I'm here.

"Eliza-dono, I've brought you some drinks. How about resting for a little while?"

When I returned home, I was about to begin investigating Viscount Rogshia by candlelight in my study when I was suddenly interrupted unexpectedly. When I looked to see who it was, I saw that it was Oscar, who was already being invited into the room by Claudia. There was also a maid with a tray in her hand behind him, who walked into the room gingerly. Come to think of it, I've never called any maids to my study before.

"Ahh, thanks. Hope you don't mind the mess here."

"I don't mind at all. Rather than that, what are you investigating? Is there anything I can help with?"

With his nature of taking everything seriously, even worrying about me, I could only smile wryly. He had left with Bellway to go back to Kaldia immediately in order to take care of all the knight order establishment procedures. It would have been difficult to ask him to do anything else for me right away, and even if he could help, I would prefer it if he'd help Earl Terejia first instead of me.

.....Is what I had thought.

Poke, Claudia gently poked my side. Stop it, don't pinch me next. My muscles aren't hard enough, and have many soft spots. What is it, when I looked at her, she mouthed "Kaldia army" to me under her breath.

Kaldia army? Ahh, reorganizing the army. It wasn't an immediate problem, so it didn't come to my mind.

"Mmm, sorry, Oscar-dono. There is one thing I would like your help with?"

"Mm? Okay."

“It’s not a great hurry, but I would like to leave you and Claudia-dono in charge of reorganizing the Kaldia army. There are some unique things about the army’s current system..... You can hear the specifics from Claudia-dono later.”

Mmm, Oscar simply nodded and responded that he accepted. So this is one less thing off my mind, wonderful. I felt more relaxed already, and I took a sip of the black tea he had brought for me.

“.....What,”

My nose immediately felt such a strong, sweet, cool and minty sensation. Um, what’s this..... It actually feels like I’ve smelled this already recently just today.

“.....Did you change the usual tea blend?”

“Ahh, it seems that some Renvia flower petals were added today.”

Renvia flowers again. The flowers in the Rogshia mansion’s garden, where I chatted with Feria only about unimportant gossip, with a strange and uncomfortable atmosphere that was probably mostly my own fault. I must have been smelling these flowers at that time, so this is what Renvia is.

Renvia flowers sure have popped up a lot today.

“.....I’m sorry that you went to all the trouble of bringing this to me, but please just stick with the usual.”

I stood up as I said so, and Oscar was tilting his head at me quizzically, while Claudia who knew about everything that happened at the Rogshia mansion was grinning like a cat.

CHAPTER 119

STILL SHORT ON PEOPLE

Oscar's come all the way from Fort Jugfena to become my knight, and it's been about a month since he's arrived, but before I realized it, Bellway's become busy running all around Arxia setting up a meeting between the Jugfena region domains of Kaldia, Jugfena, and Genas, and on Earl Terejia's end, there's an astonishingly even greater amount of work to be done.

I have to write the budget proposal for the knight order's activities for the next two years, training plans, and regulations for future knights, all of these are things I must tackle immediately. Then I also have to create some new forms, design the garden for the mansion, make some proposals for new pumpkin recipes, decide the type of feed for the horses, and so on.

The truly frightening thing is that somehow Oscar is managing to help me take care of all this work in between traveling so much between the royal capital and the Jugfena domains.

How did this happen.

I clutched my head. I thought that he was just a serious person before, but is he actually another unbelievable person like Claudia? The speed at which he goes about things is Claudia's level.

"Everything's finally been completed."

Oscar said so with such a proud expression on his face, but all I said was "I see" with a nonchalant tone of voice. It's nice that his eyes are sparkling with eagerness, but I can also see fatigue in them. He's overworking himself.

"We've almost finished making the arrangements with the Jugfena royal domain and the Genas domain, the meeting with them should be scheduled sometime late this summer. It's been agreed upon that we'll all meet at Margrave Genas's mansion."

“Ahh, it went smoother than I expected. I’ll leave the follow-up to you. Even though you haven’t officially become my knight yet, it pains me that I have to ask you to do so much unrelated work for me.....”

“No, I like doing these things.”

Meaning, he’s a workaholic. He must take after Earl Terejia in this, but unlike the earl, Oscar even enjoys working and has a strong sense of accomplishment when getting things done. I’ve only noticed this recently, but it seems Oscar has the same face that Claudia has when twirling her spear, whenever he’s working on something. I wonder what’s so fun about it all, but I won’t say anything. If it’s something I don’t understand about feelings, all the more reason not to ask.

“It’s a great help that you finish your work so fast, but do remember take a break once in a while, and move your body about.....”

Oscar’s eyes quite remind me of dead fish floating in a pond. I tried to suggest that he refresh himself, but,

“Please do not worry. Whenever I have spare time, I train as much as possible together with Claudia-dono in spear practice.”

Even though he was smiling, I felt like the color of his eyes got even more stagnant. Of course I’d been referring to light exercise, and not the type of all-out training that training together with Claudia would entail.

I swore to myself that I would stop interfering with Oscar and his reasons for liking to work so much. If I get too close, I’ll catch his addiction to working. I’m just going to pretend I don’t see anything.

However, why is it that he still has the free time to train with Claudia even though he has that much work to do every day..... I twisted my neck trying to think about it, but even though I felt like I would get a headache from overthinking all this, I couldn’t stop myself.

Having a new capable subordinate join me is the best kind of news. Congratulations to me. Oscar’s been able to take over some of Earl Terejia’s work, so my hope that the Earl’s workload will decrease has finally come true as well. As expected though, I’m still short on personnel, and once again I realized through my fatigue that human resources are of vital importance to me.



Outside the window, the sun is beginning to set. I lit a candlestick, and began calculating the tax income sheets for Kaldia that I had laying on my desk.

In Arxia, we use a type of paper money called Arcs, but since Kaldia is mostly a closed domain with little outside contact, we use mostly a barter system. Trading for food and other goods with domains that are better off , as well as exchanging goods for cash, is all considered the job of the domain lord. I must collect the goods given by each village as tax, trade them for other necessary items with other domains, and anything left over after giving what's needed to each village is my profit.

In Kaldia, the domain lord's share is currently 30%. This is a lower rate than most other domains, but it's not a problem. In addition to the tax income, I also receive 60% of the sales revenue from selling the wheat crops raised by the Kaldia army. In eastern Arxia the land is less suitable for cultivating wheat, and rye is the main crop, so wheat's price is higher.

And as for a new source of tax income, I'm thinking about the pumpkins that my new citizens brought. Last summer, I tried cultivating pumpkins around the mansion, in Claria village, and the new Pioneer village, and it was a success, so this year I'm thinking about having two more villages begin to raise pumpkins.

I didn't want to start so big at first, because I would need to set prices and a system for the pumpkins, but starting next year I definitely want to add some more fields and begin fully developing. Wheat crops are limited by areas where they can grow and can't be grown in the same field all during the year, but rye is a hardier crop that grows in more difficult climates and infertile lands for longer periods of time. Also, I think that I'm going to use crop rotation between wheat and pumpkins in order to prevent any major crop disasters one year from affecting the next year as well. I'm just an amateur in farming and only have my common sense to go off of, but I think it's better than not doing anything at all.

Besides crops, I also want to increase the number of livestock in Kaldia, since the Shiru tribe has taken the trouble of bringing livestock with them. I want to increase the number to where it's feasible for me to start trading in dairy products. But there's many things I need to consider first, in order to not place too much of a burden on my citizens.

Last year, thanks to Lord Carson's carpenters, life in Pioneer village has finally begun stabilizing. This year they've been greatly successful at making traps to catch fish in shallow water, so I also need to think about distribution methods for fish. Since we don't have the means to preserve raw fish and transport it to other domains, this will probably have to be limited to sending raw fish to other villages.

Although Oscar's reduced my amount of work as well, there's still so many improvement projects to work on for the domain. I used to write down whatever ideas I had on paper, and I've filled up six entire pages. I wonder just when it will be that I'll be able to finish turning all of those ideas into reality.

Earl Terejia's age is also getting up there, so my work is increasing every year, but with the increase in living standards in my domain, it brings more work to me as well. One of the biggest problems is that few people are literate, so only Earl Terejia, Bellway, and myself, as well as Oscar who just joined us, we're the only ones handling the entirety of the paperwork as there's nobody else to do it.

After I finished going over the paperwork, I laid down on my desk weakly, drained of energy. A groan-like sound managed to escape my throat without my permission.

.....Should I talk to my governess Mrs. Marshan, to see if she would be interested in a direct post under me as a civil official? Because she's also nobility, she can register directly for a civil officer post. I can have her take on the simple tasks such as calculating tax income first, to decrease the overall workload.

When I thought about how Earl Terejia might not be around for much longer, my stomach began hurting. It doesn't matter who, but maybe I need to start searching for my next guardian. I don't need help running my domain anymore, but as a minor I still need an adult around for various things.

The root of all my problems is that I don't have enough personnel.....

Once again I sighed, and another groan escaped me.

CHAPTER 120

PRINCE

Knight orders are now considered a branch of the military, but in the past when our kingdom was established, knights referred to those who protected St. Ahar, or battle priests that fought in the military.

That's why even today, knights must have their knight cloaks sanctified by holy water in a church ritual, it's a remnant from that time. I attended the ceremony, and from what I could see, the holy water is considered holy is because it's water from the spring at the altar where St. Ahar is buried, which is also where the ceremony is taking place today. It's a spring that hasn't dried up even though St. Ahar died more than a millennium ago, so maybe there's something special about it after all.

Today is the day when my knight order will become formally recognized, so together with Earl Terejia, Claudia, and Oscar, we all headed to the Divine Temple of Misorua.

Claudia and Oscar are wearing the uniforms of the Kaldia knight order for the first time today, and it looks better on them than I expected. They're going to officially become knights, and their knight cloaks have white as the main color, they're well fitting of the sparkling image.

Especially Claudia, she looks so smooth and cool, almost as if she's a handsome prince. Actually though, only the royal family's knights are allowed to use pure white for their knight cloaks, so the cloaks I designed have silver and gold embroidery on them as well.

Since this is a formal church ritual, I was in knight attire as well, but my cloak's contrast with my eye color..... Well, I've inherited my father Orville's scarlet eyes. It's so similar to the color of blood, I really don't like it at all.

"I think we've arrived too early."

Earl Terejia looked at the water clock in the corridor and made such a comment, which Claudia replied to with her own idea almost instantly.

"W, well then, is it alright if I walk around a little?"

In a rare instance for her, her voice is shaky. She doesn't seem composed, either. I suppose that even Claudia can't keep calm on the day when she'll finally achieve her dream that she's had for so many years. She's wanted to become a knight for so long, that when she finally put on her knight uniform this morning, she almost fainted. Of course, she knows that she'll ruin the whole schedule if she actually faints, so Claudia managed to rebound upwards mid-fall and somehow stand up straight again even after falling backwards.Is this a testament to her flexibility, I wonder.

Oscar who also wanted to become a knight had such a proud expression as well, so I can really tell how badly Claudia wanted this.

"Earl Terejia, I think it'll be good for her if she gets a little breather first."

"Mmm....., you're right. Let's take a walk in the garden until the priest gets here."

Although Earl Terejia widened his eyes in surprise at seeing how Claudia was acting, he merely shook his head slightly and gave his permission. I can tell that he also means for me to go along with Claudia, probably to look after her. I nodded, stopped leaning against the handrail in the corridor, and gently tugged Claudia's sleeve. Claudia obediently followed after me, walking unsteadily.

The central courtyard in the Divine Temple of Misorua serves as both a garden and a passageway. There are buildings north, south, east, and west of the central garden, but only the southern building is open to commoners. The northern building is where the priests and monks live and study, the eastern building is a major cathedral, and the western building has a smaller cathedral and places such as confession rooms and ceremonial ritual locations.

"Even though it's the central courtyard..... There's no flowers. What a strange garden."

Claudia made a frank statement about the courtyard garden, and I commented "you're right" in agreement. This garden consists only of shrubs and grasses, and although when looking closely you can see some tiny white flowers blossoming, it's nothing even close to the ornamental flowers for admiring that you'd see in most normal gardens.

Claudia walked around in circles for a while, then she squatted down in the shadows of some shrubs and sighed. This is even rarer, it seems that she's not energetic because she's too nervous.

“.....Sorry, Eliza-dono. Could you let me be alone for a little while? I promise not to move from here.”

“Ah..... I understand. But, just for a little while.”

“Thank you.”

Although I’m a bit worried about leaving Claudia alone when she’s feeling so much tension, I don’t want to go against her wish, so I made my way between the shrubs, and walked deeper into the garden.



Walking deeper into the garden, I noticed the plants surrounding the garden as a sort of fence getting gradually taller. They seem to be some type of rose plants, but with no flowers. I’m not an expert in botany, but when I looked closer, I noticed some other plants that should be flowering currently in this season, but I couldn’t find a single flower.

Just as I was thinking how strange it all was, I noticed many traces of scissor cuts on the branches.Someone cut off all the flowers, no, maybe took them all for some reason. Well, I don’t know the story behind all this.

When I looked up again to check my surroundings, I could hear the sound of footsteps crunching on grass from the north. Is it one of the monks that live in the north building, I wonder.

Upon listening more closely, it sounds like he’s sprinkling water on the plants. Sometimes it sounds like he’s using an unreasonable amount of water though, so maybe he’s not used to the work yet.

I thought about it a little, and looked back at the path I just took. It might be slightly too early to return yet, as Claudia had wanted some time by herself. Let’s do this instead, I tried walking as silently as possible and headed for the direction of the watering sounds.

“.....Is someone there?”

It seems like my efforts at going unnoticed have failed. The person asking me the question sounded like a young teenager, whose voice hadn’t changed yet. He sounds

like he's highly on guard against me. Why would a monk in the divine temple have anything to be wary about, I wonder?

"I'm just taking a walk in the garden. Don't mind me."

At my answer, I could hear the tension disappearing from his voice.

".....A child?"

Hey, aren't you still a child yourself? I kept that thought to myself though, and as I went around the bushes, I suddenly saw the boy who was speaking to me.

"!!"

I couldn't help but stare wide-eyed in surprise. Even though this is my first time meeting him, I definitely know who he is.

At that moment, for the first time –

I met one of the main characters from the otome game.

CHAPTER 121

MY REMAINING MEMORIES

I was only slightly shaken, though. Since we are in the royal capital after all, I'd already considered that we might meet one day.

If I manage to stay alive long enough to get there, I knew already that I would meet the otome game characters in noble school. This is earlier than I expected, but it's not a big deal.

He's wearing properly fitted monk attire..... He's in a white robe similar to a longcoat, and has rich black hair that's clean and well cared for. I think he's right before reaching teenager status, around 12 years old or so. He's got unusual purple eyes that reflect the sunshine beautifully, like jewels.

I don't know his actual name, but in the otome game he was just called Alb.It's just that, there's one big difference between the drawings in the otome game and the boy before me. Alb had a slightly disfigured face, he was a young man that wouldn't leave a good first impression with his appearance. The boy before me has a very healthy face still.

Just what is going to happen to him in the five years before he reaches noble school.....

Alb isn't his original name, it's a new name given to him after he enters the church and becomes a monk. According to my memories, in the game's character introductions, it says that his "monk name is Alb."

.....At least that's what it said in the instruction manual. To tell the truth, I never met him ingame at all. As for why, it's because I only played this game based on the recommendation of my younger sister, and I was only about to begin my second playthrough on another route when I died.

So, that is to say, I don't know what type of position Alb has, what his background or personality is like, nor do I remember most things my sister might have told me.

Of course, he's a living human being though, and there's no evidence whatsoever that he'll behave the same way as the ingame character, so this shouldn't be a problem.

I only remember one thing that my sister told me about Alb. He only comes into the story after Eliza is executed, but other than that I have no details about him.

“.....A formal knight, uniform?”

When he saw me, his first reaction was one of surprise, muttering to himself. I glanced over my uniform again, then returned my line of sight to the boy.

“I’m here for a ceremonial ritual, to establish a knight order in my domain.”

“.....Oh wow, you’re a domain lord? This young?”

“My father died quite early.”

I gave only a brief explanation, but the boy was nodding, it seems like he gets what I’m saying. There are also other examples out there of children inheriting their father’s position as a domain lord when the father dies young, after all.Well, that’s usually limited only to boys, though. When it’s a girl that’s left behind, usually it’s other male relatives that have a higher priority when it comes to inheritance.

Normally most noble families will have many relatives. Even if not related by blood, those that marry into the family are also taken into consideration. However, there’s no precedent like the Kaldia family, where every family member was massacred and only left one person to inherit the title. Well, it’s troublesome to explain that much, and there’s no point, so I’ll just save my breath.

“If you came here for a ritual, why are you here walking in the garden? Could it be, did you get lost?”

“No. I arrived earlier than scheduled, so I simply thought I’d spend some time here.”

Even after learning I was a domain lord, meaning a noble, he didn’t change his tone of voice with me at all. He must be from quite a high ranking noble family. Since he’s one of the main characters from the otome game, maybe he’s even from the Melloart royal family.

In Arxia where the church and the law are deeply intertwined, monks aren’t people that abandon worldly life, but rather they dedicate their lives to being enforcers of the law. In other words, monks don’t completely abandon their past lives and positions.

That's why I don't find it strange even if he doesn't change his tone of voice when talking to me. On the contrary, since he's a monk, I should be using polite speech with him.

"Oh, that's fine then."

After learning that I wasn't a lost child, he smiled faintly. It would have been difficult to detect if I wasn't looking directly at him all this time, it was such a minute change, but it still somehow managed to be expressive.

"Are you taking care of this garden?"

"Ahh. I just water the plants.Although, I'm still not used to it, so I'm not very good. I recommend that you not go beyond the hedges there. You're wearing such a nice knight uniform, it would be a shame to get it dirty."

He gave me some advice while furrowing his eyebrows. Although his facial expression looked grumpy, I was able to accurately read his feelings. He has high expectations of himself and is unsatisfied with his own low quality of work. It was an expression that made me feel rather close to him.

"Got it, I'll turn back.But not right now, though."

"Why's that? Is there some sort of problem?"

"It's, the knight that's receiving the ceremony feels too nervous about it..... and asked to be alone for a little while. I wanted to give it some more time."

"I see. Then, I won't water where you're standing for the time being."

"Sorry about the inconvenience, and thank you for understanding....."

He has a rather passive tone of voice. Somehow, it feels so similar to me, it sounds almost like a monotone. Maybe he noticed me observing him, he smiled faintly again. I gave a slight smile as well, but perhaps my cheeks only barely twitched, just like the boy in front of me. I feel a sense of affinity with him.

"Since I'm not going back yet, I have some free time. Shall we chat?"

"Chat?"

I wonder if he minds, he fell silent after saying only one word. He stopped working on the plants and indicated with his hand for me to follow him. He led me to an open space with a plain stone bench that seemed like it was maintained regularly. He sat on one end of it, and motioned for me to sit on the other.

.....Well, it's not considered proper etiquette for boys and girls to sit on the same chair. Or I should say it's not good if anyone is watching, and I can still barely make the excuse that I'm still a young child. I was confused for a moment, then remembered other situations where people mistook me for a boy, and I sat down next to him without saying anything. I don't really have the habit of making idle chatter with myself or with others, so I decided to ask him what topic he liked.

"So, what would you like to chat about?"

"Anything is fine. For example..... oh, how about this. How about telling me about your friends? What types of things do you like to do with your friends?"

When he asked me this question somewhat cheerfully, I felt like I had been struck by lightning.

.....A conversation about friends, but I have hardly any to talk about!

CHAPTER 122

GIVING YOU BLESSINGS

With ambiguous, indescribable feelings, I decided to talk about Claudia.

I could have talked about the Shiru children as well, but daily life with them is so far removed from the noble lifestyle, I felt like it wouldn't be a suitable topic for the boy in front of me. Talking about Ratoka with how far apart we've drifted would be even more terrible. I've never had even a moment with him where I can use the term "friendship" to describe. So he's out of the question.

Then, the only other children around me are Elise and Paulo.And although there's a bit of a gap in our ages, there's Claudia, and even Kamil.

Kamil may have been the closest person to me I could call a friend up until the point where I started distrusting him. He sometimes praised me or made fun of me depending on the situation, and when we were alone together, we were equals. But, I'd feel uncomfortable talking about him with someone I don't even know. Now that I think about it, I've never spoken about Kamil with anyone else before. I've never felt like talking to anyone about him before, either.

Since Paulo's a soldier in the Kaldia army, I don't have much contact with him, and Elise is so sickly that I mostly only talk to her through letters, telling her stories.

So, that means I'm only left with Claudia to talk about.

She's a noble girl that's staying in my mansion as my playmate..... When I told him this, I noticed that it didn't feel strange at all to say it out loud. Even despite the age gap, I enjoy her antics. As for her daily life, she's really enthused about swinging around her spear every day, she'll talk to anyone despite whatever the atmosphere is like, she loves riding horses, and just generally running about everywhere, even jumping out of second story windows, that sort of thing. Although sometimes she will bother me, she always tries her hardest at everything she does, and she doesn't act her age at all.

Talking about all these silly things regarding Claudia, somehow it felt as if with her childlike innocence, she was actually younger than me.

“She seems like quite an energetic girl, your playmate.”

The boy who was listening to me all this time seemed to be half smiling, he probably thinks Claudia is similar to my age or younger than me, since I didn't mention her age.

And after I just finished talking about Claudia, the person herself gathered her emotions together and came to find me. Unlike me, she's incredibly skilled at switching gears quickly when it comes to emotions. She now looks like a handsome knight with no sign of tension at all, and the boy next to me seemed quite shocked at her appearance.

He would probably never imagine that this handsome knight in front of him is that “energetic girl” he just heard about.

“Is this the, new, knight that's going to serve under you? This is so..... How to say it, dignified.....”

“This knight has always been the most skilled in my domain, and has been aiming for the goal of becoming a knight for such a long time.”

“Mmm, I see.”

The boy nodded. Has Claudia ever acted dignified before, I wonder, although perhaps her behavior is also that of a warrior's, I always felt like she acted more like a cat than a girl her age. But I suppose she can be dignified as well.

“I see..... It's great that your knight was able to have a wish granted.....”

In a tiny voice, I heard him muttering that to himself under his breath. I felt it was unfortunate that I heard this, since he obviously didn't mean for anyone to hear that. I didn't really understand what he meant by it, so I glanced at him, and immediately regretted doing so. If only I hadn't seen his expression.

It seems that Claudia, with her sharper senses than normal people, heard him as well, as she also took a quick glance at him, before meeting my eyes and keeping her gaze fixed on me.

“.....Shall we return?”

I called out to Claudia, wanting to leave here in a hurry, and rose up from the bench. The boy also raised his face, and said “it’s good that you were able to find each other, see you later.” I made an appropriate response, and hurriedly left the garden together with Claudia.



“.....That boy had a terrible expression on his face.”

After confirming to make sure nobody was around, Claudia whispered that to me in a tiny voice. She was looking directly at the garden we had just left.

Indeed, what a terrible expression it had been. His face had been empty, desolate, or maybe it was despair. He was probably a noble before with a high position, but he had been forced into the monastery before he could attend noble school, so he could no longer do as he liked, that’s probably the reason behind the expression on his face when he said how nice it was that my knight got a wish fulfilled.

“He must have his own circumstances.”

I made that comment, and Claudia tilted her head as if she was thinking about it, then she nodded in agreement. Well, everyone has their own circumstances. Such as Claudia who’d always wanted to be a knight, even knowing how difficult it would be.

She’s really lucky. Her parents allowed her to do as she wished until she reaches 20 years of age, I really need her existence by my side, Earl Terejia being able to set up the knight order for me, all these things led to her today being able to wear a knight’s uniform for the first time.

He definitely isn’t a lucky one. And I’m sure that just like him, there are countless other “unlucky” people out there that aren’t able to fulfill their dreams.

“.....I can’t do anything for him.”

I have my citizens. For someone like him who has barely any connection to me, I don’t have the spare time to worry about him.

“I understand, Eliza-dono. Got it.”

Claudia didn't say anything else and just nodded. She was looking at me with an earnest look in her eyes. Honestly, even though she's clumsy in so many aspects, she's also surprisingly astute in others. For just an instant, even though we didn't exchange words, Claudia was perhaps acting more seriously than I was.

I hope that her beautiful heart won't be tainted by malevolence one day. -Yes, I think that I should protect it.

".....Oh right, I almost forgot."

"Hm?"

Indeed, there's something I haven't said to her yet. As she tilted her head questioningly, I took both of her hands in mine.

"Congratulations, Claudia-dono. You've always been such a great help to me. Thank you. I'll be relying on you in the future as well."

As my knight, but there were some things I still wasn't able to say out loud, and I kept it in my heart instead.

CHAPTER 123

CAPTURE

I've achieved my goal of establishing a knight order, but there's still several major tasks remaining ahead of me.

I'm talking about the meeting between the Jugfena region domains of Kaldia, Jugfena, and Genas, as well as the issue of Feria Rogshia's engagement.

There's also some other points of concern. For example, the movements of the woman named Diferis and her terrorist organization described to me by the bandits a few years back, and their possible connections to the northern nobles. While Priest Faris had provided some information to Earl Terejia, there's been no progress.

The date for the meeting between the three Jugfena region domains has already been decided, so there's just some various small matters that need to be taken care of before that. Other than that, it's just waiting for the day to arrive.

However, Feria Rogshia's engagement is a special problem.

The Ogren family is a northern noble family, and they're quite close to the Nordsturms. I'm pretty sure that Marquis Nordsturm had Viscount Ogren request me on purpose, and I'm not enthusiastic about having to complete a task for them.

Not only that, I have suspicions that they may be traitors to our country. This suspicion is because they may be connected to Diferis, who is working to undermine Arxia as a terrorist. But Diferis seems to be hiding in the north somewhere, and there's no evidence to connect her to the northern nobles.

Personally speaking, with my suspicion against them, I don't want to help them arrange a marriage with nobles from the Greenfield region, so close to the capital.

Should I crush this engagement, or should I fix it like I'm supposed to?

Breaking the engagement will be a problem as well. If I merely break the engagement without being able to give a really good reason, this will severely affect my status as a noble, and Earl Terejia's standing will suffer as well.

How bothersome, this engagement involving the fates of the Ogren and Rogshia families. Both domains already depend on each other for trade. That's why it's so irritating that Feria's only thinking about herself with her actions.

And so, the days passed by as I gathered information on the other domains, looking for a method to deal with this problem.

– If only I could unlearn what I was just about to find out.

“Hmm? Isn't that Earl Freche's youngest son?”

Summer's almost over, and I'll be soon returning to my domain from the royal capital. I'm currently on my way to shop for a souvenir for Elise at a high class store. Claudia made a loud comment suddenly as she peered outside the horse-drawn carriage's window.

“.....Are you acquainted with Earl Freche?”

“No, not at all. It's just that his son is the same age as me, so I visited an evening party at the Freche residence once in the past.”

Somehow, I'm a little unconvinced at Claudia saying she was able to remember Earl Freche's son even though she only met him once. For someone like her who's so bad with remembering names, it took several years before she memorized who I was.Sometimes, from the bottom of my heart, I truly believe that Claudia is an incomprehensible existence.

I have no connections to Earl Freche at all, unless you count me getting horses and training from the Ruktoferd domain, which is part of the Freche region. Well, this is a good time to get to know more nobles, and band together against the threat of our neighbors. Thinking this, I decided to peek out the window as well to see what Earl Freche's youngest son looked like.

When I looked in the same direction as Claudia, at the shops along the street, I saw a teenage boy on the edge of reaching adulthood, and a girl holding hands with him walking with a delighted expression on her face. I wonder if she detected us looking, she just happened to look back directly at us.

It's a face I'm all too familiar with.

It was Feria Rogshia, the person responsible for so much of my aggravation, foolishly enjoying a date in public with a boy that's not her fiancé, without caring about who might see her.

".....Lady Feria."

I couldn't help but utter her name in exasperation. I found it so unexpected, that Feria would do this in broad daylight.

That girl, does she have the awareness that she could be cast out of noble society together with that boy? Or is it just the recklessness of youth, and she's not thinking at all?

Claudia's expression turned serious as she met my gaze. After receiving my cue, she bounded out of the horse carriage's window as lithely as a cat – artistry in motion.

My heart is pounding. Well, even though I'm sort of used to it now, it still gives me breathing difficulty. I feel like this may shorten my life span, but I've already given up on talking to Claudia about jumping out of windows. I suppose I have no choice but to get accustomed to this.

I heard Claudia's voice telling the servant to stop the carriage. As the horse gradually slowed, and the scenery outside the window stopped moving, this time I heard Claudia's voice straight from above me, on the roof of the carriage.

"-Hello there, please wait a moment."

This road is rather deserted, so Claudia's voice carried far. Several people suddenly appeared from the shadows. I'm guessing they're probably Earl Freche's son's bodyguards. Although public order is quite good in the noble district, it's still impossible for most nobles to go outside by themselves.

.....But anyways. I won't make any assumptions about Earl Freche's son, but for now it's quite apparent that Viscount Rogshia doesn't intend to restrict his daughter's movements in any way whatsoever.

This is getting more and more bothersome, this annoying task.

The troublesome couple in question looked back at Claudia with expressions of shock on their faces. At seeing their faces pale in unison, I couldn't help but chuckle slightly.

Both of them should currently be students at noble school. There's a rule that students who live in the dormitory aren't allowed to leave without permission. Usually only the head of the household can give their children permission to leave.....

Since they seem so flustered at us simply calling out to them, perhaps they've sneaked out of school without permission. Due to this situation, are they going to have to request me to keep it secret for them?

"W, what is it....."

Earl Freche's son seemed at a loss for what to say as he asked Claudia why she called out to them. Claudia has a stern expression aimed directly at Feria.This is the first time I've seen such an expression on her face. Claudia's temperament is usually simultaneously competitive yet gentle, but I've always thought that she held no negative feelings towards others whatsoever.

"You're Viscount Rogshia's daughter, and Earl Freche's son, right? Who else are you with?"

"....."

"Are you lost? That's no good at all. How about I take you guys to the noble school?"

"N, no! There's no need for you to go to all this trouble, when we don't even know each other!"

Blood seemed to be draining from Freche's son's face as he backed away from Claudia, and even hid behind Feria. Claudia kept that strict expression on her face, and shook her head saying she didn't mind the trouble at all.

"It will be evening soon enough, and we're currently quite close to the noble school. - Also, my lord will definitely have some matters to discuss with Lady Rogshia here."

Feria's shoulder suddenly jerked upwards. I could see fear in her eyes, from Claudia's imposing presence, as her shoulder started trembling. That's when she finally noticed me as well.

"Ah-"

Now she was simply dumbfounded, and she sat down right where she was standing in the middle of the street. Freche's son tried his best to catch her, but perhaps he simply isn't strong enough, both of them ended up falling down. With a hup, Claudia made it look easy as she pulled both of them up again.

"Yep, it seems like you two must be quite exhausted."

Saying that to the two targets she's captured, how wonderfully ironic she can be.

CHAPTER 124

INTERROGATION

“Well then..... Can you tell us your story?”

In my residence’s tiny reception room, Claudia and I, the two noble teenagers that we just captured, and Oscar, who’s also taken on the role of gathering information for me, were all crammed in together. It’s an overwhelming situation for Feria and Freche’s son.

The young couple is so stiff, as if we’re threatening them or something. Feria’s face is ashen.Well, although I’m calling them young, I’m actually even younger than they are, technically.

“Without any companions, where were the two of you headed? Also, Lady Feria, you happen to have an engagement. You won’t exactly be praised for jaunting about on the streets with a boy. Do you have a permit showing permission from the noble school? I need to notify the school that I was able to protect you. Please let me confirm your permit.”

I held out my hand as if to say give it to me, that’s when Freche’s youngest son who had been chewing his lip all this time finally lifted his head with a glare aimed at me.

“Why do we need to show you our permit? You’re saying that you protected us, but you’re just a child that’s not even in noble school yet, where’s the head of your household, at the very least I should be talking to someone ranked above you.”

Oh? Come to think of it, while Feria does know who I am, I still haven’t formally introduced myself yet to this boy.

“My apologies for the late introduction. I am Eliza Kaldia. I’m currently the domain lord of Kaldia, from the Jugfena region. I have some business with Lady Feria and her father, so that’s why I’m acquainted with Lady Feria.”

“It couldn’t be. You’re the head of the house?”

I nodded in confirmation, and the young Freche's mouth was wide agape in astonishment. Then, he lowered his face again with a scared expression. Oi, you can't show me a permit?

".....Lady Feria."

It can't be helped, let's turn to Feria, she was biting her lips as well, although she opened her mouth to talk even as she was trembling.

"I, I, was heading for my fiancé's place, the Ogren residence. The reason for going there is uh, er, private.Um, this here is Cornell Freche-sama, my old friend, and he was taking the trouble of accompanying me to the Ogren residence."

For the time being, I'm going to ignore the part where she introduced Cornell Freche. Ogren? This is a name I never thought I'd hear Feria say, so I tilted my head.

"Something private, eh. That's why, you snuck out of school?"

".....Yes."

Maybe she's realized she can't hide it anymore, she admitted that she didn't have a permit to leave school and nodded.

"I don't know the details, but it's about my engagement. I know that my fiancé is the Ogren family's son."

"I'm already aware. After all, I got acquainted with you in the first place because..... The Ogren family asked me to make sure that the engagement with you proceeded smoothly."

I don't know what Viscount Ogren thinks about this entire situation at all, so I vented my frustration as I told her my purpose. Now that she's told me directly about Ogren when she's kept silent all this time before, I feel like there's no need for me to hide my task given to me by the church from her.

"Eh.....?"

"Viscount Ogren went to the trouble of contacting the church, and asking me to convince you to go through with the engagement because it looked like you weren't

really interested. Well, neither him nor your father really matter to me, I was going to observe this rubbishy situation for a little longer, but.”

“Such a thing.....”

Feria was covering her mouth with her hand as if she couldn’t believe what was going on. Maybe it’s an unconscious reaction, I saw her weakly grabbing onto Cornell Freche’s sleeve.

“.....Please wait a moment, Lord Kaldia. I think you’re having a misunderstanding about the relationship between Feria and myself.”

Did he gain strength from Feria’s fingertips I wonder, Cornell Freche who had been drooping his shoulders all this time, suddenly cut in with a soft voice.

It’s difficult to hear him clearly. I couldn’t help but furrow my eyebrows, I’ve wasted the time frame in which he was afraid. My place is no House of Lords, where even the small things can threaten and scare people.Besides, I think that it would be a miserable thing to be scared of a child more than five years younger than he is. Quite pitiful, really. I would prefer it if he could stand up straighter.

“A misunderstanding? So, what’s your excuse for sneaking out of school together with a girl that’s already engaged?”

“That’s not it! In the first place, Feria’s engagement..... Don’t get angry at Feria. Their, no, what that guy really wants is for their engagement to be broken!”

He suddenly started shouting. Suddenly going from soft-spoken to shouting angrily in a show of unstable emotions, is he really okay, I wonder. I couldn’t help but start worrying.



The following is the story that Cornell Freche told me.

Originally, Cornell was a childhood friend of Feria and her fiancé, Ista Ogren. They all grew up together, being neighbors in the noble district. The three of them hung out together, even after entering noble school.

However, when Ista Ogren became a third-year student, and Cornell and Feria became second-years, the relationship between them changed slightly. The reason was because Ista liked a noble girl other than Feria. When Ista began spending more time with that girl, the natural outcome was that Cornell and Feria started being together more often. And after that, the relationship between them developed as I expected.

During the time that Ista was about to graduate from noble school, the three of them had a talk with each other about their futures. Ista said that he definitely agreed to canceling the engagement with Feria, and that he wanted to get engaged to the girl he liked instead, swearing that he would return to the Ogren domain to persuade his father, Viscount Ogren, after graduation.

“After he returned to the Ogren domain, we’ve exchanged letters three times, but it seems that persuading his father isn’t going well. However, this time Viscount Ogren summoned us to his residence, saying that after much persuasion by his son, he’s decided to think it over again after listening to all three of us directly.”

I listened silently throughout all of Cornell Freche’s long story that he desperately tried to explain clearly to me. He’s obviously not used to having to clarify things for others.

.....Just what should I say in this type of situation? Am I supposed to be surprised, or amused? Cornell and Feria looked at me with such serious expressions as I thought about what to say.

“It’s well known within school that Feria and Ista are good friends as well as engaged to each other. That’s why, we can’t ask for permission to go out and let rumors spread in school, as it would greatly damage the reputation of both families.....”

I wonder if he’s said everything he wants to say, after Cornell Freche finished his story, he lowered his head again. Is he trying to gain sympathy from me by acting modest?

-I have no leeway to sympathize with him whatsoever, so I decided to pretend as if I didn’t see his action.

I’m absolutely at a loss for what to say right now, and somehow I ended up glancing in Oscar’s direction. He had an expression that blatantly said his head was hurting from this situation. I wish I could let my emotions at this headache of a mess show on my face as well.

CHAPTER 125

A PESKY MEMORY ABOUT NOT BEING HONEST

“.....I see, I understand your situation now. I have several things I would like to say about what you just told me.”

I finally cut into Cornell’s story with a gloomy tone of voice, so Cornell and Feria were looking at me with surprise on their faces. I just made a decision to use this type of atmosphere.....

“I’ve investigated various things about Lady Feria’s engagement. There’s still a few things I haven’t checked yet, but allow me to come to a preliminary conclusion based on what I currently know. Canceling the engagement between the Ogren and Rogshia families will be basically impossible.”

“.....What?”

An expression of dissatisfaction started distorting Cornell’s face. Since explaining everything to him would be troublesome, I looked in Oscar’s direction. He nodded to me as he adopted a strict expression strikingly similar to Earl Terejia’s, and he began a detailed explanation in my place.

“The engagement between the Ogren and Rogshia families involves a debt owed by the Rogshia family. About 15 years ago, the Ogren and Rogshia families began a deep relationship with each other when the Rogshia domain started a new business. At that time, the Ogren family made a loan as the beginning capital for the business. Also, the loan amount was so large, that the law required the two families become relatives through marriage as collateral, so the engagement between the son and daughter of the two houses was decided upon.”

This happened right around the time that Ista Ogren and Feria Rogshia were born. Viscount Ogren’s wife happened to be from the Greenfield region, and was a childhood friend of Feria’s mother.

“I shall skim over the details, but suffice it to say that the business ended up in failure. In order to recoup their losses, both families took on further debts, and only in the last five years have they finally begun making a profit. However, the money that the

Rogshias borrowed from the Ogrens, was in turn loaned to the Ogrens by the Nordsturms, the guardian family for the Ogrens. Well, simply speaking, the Ogrens were a middle man.”

“Such a thing..... My father, has debts?”

“Yes, indeed. Because of this reason, breaking the engagement will not be legally possible until the debt of the Rogshia and Ogren families is reduced to 3 million arcs or less. If the engagement is broken, it will result in bankruptcy, loss of noble status, confiscation of ruling rights, and the domain itself will be subject to acquisition by others.”

As Oscar calmly continued his summary, Feria’s face was growing paler and paler. I can tell that she’s despairing.

The relations between various domains and the legal benefits of noble marriage should all be topics covered as part of a noble’s education, did she really never learn any of this I wonder. Well, it probably has to do with her spoiled upbringing, although I can’t say with absolute certainty.

Conversely, Cornell’s expression was a sharp contrast to Feria’s, as he appeared to be thinking deeply about the situation. Well, since he’s Earl Freche’s son, I think just his wedding dowry alone will be around 5 million arcs simply for getting married. He’s probably considering the power of his family to intervene in this situation.

“.....This is all of the information I have on hand. Since I’m not directly involved in this situation, this is all that I could find out.”

When I spoke up again, Cornell appeared to stop thinking, and met my gaze directly again.

Not a bad expression, in my opinion. He’s able to face reality, and deal with a difficult situation without resorting to useless protesting. Should I say that this is expected of a border domain noble’s son? Honestly speaking though, I’ve always been living in an abnormal situation, and doubting everyone around me, it would have been nice if I had a more normal life like his instead.

“How much is the debt owed by the Rogshia family?”

“I don’t know the exact amount. Taking into consideration the increasing interest rate after five years, I believe that it will be in the realm of 15 million arcs.”

“15 million arcs.....”

Well, it’s only an estimate, so in truth it may be more or less than this amount. It’s that information about loans can only be viewed by the lender and debtor, or those with a certificate of permit issued by the Ministry of Finance. There’s also some debts and donations that aren’t related to the Ministry of Finance, but that’s a story for another day.

Cornell was furrowing his eyebrows deeply. 15 million arcs is an amount that can purchase a small domain. There’s no way that a student like him can come up with the funds so easily.

“That’s 10 years of my salary. Quite an amount!”

Claudia who had been silent up to this point, chimed in with an incredulous tone of voice. Now that Claudia and Oscar have become knights, their salaries are paid for by Earl Terejia’s personal savings and Kaldia’s tax revenue. Their salaries are about 1.5 million arcs a year.

The knight orders managed directly by the kingdom pay out a higher salary than private knight orders. The knight order with the highest status in the kingdom, the Royal Bodyguards knight order, has an annual salary of about 3.5 million arcs. The border knights are paid about 3 million arcs per year, and if they rise in rank through promotions, the salary will increase.

By the way, knights are among the highest paid for nobles. Their annual income is higher than the average baron.

Silence fell in the room. Oscar whispered something to Claudia, and left the room.

I just realized that the light outside is beginning to dim. Should I have some snacks prepared for these two guests of mine? At any rate, they won’t be returning to the school any time soon tonight.

“.....There’s something I would like to ask.”

Although he looked like he was having difficulty finding a solution, Cornell finally spoke up again. Feria pulled on his sleeve anxiously, but he kept looking directly at me while ignoring her. When I asked him what he wanted to know, Cornell seemed hesitant, yet he was still able to speak in a firm tone of voice.

“Lord Kaldia, what would you like to do about the Ogren and Rogshia family’s engagement? I would like to hear your true feelings.”

Such a foolish question.Claudia next to me appeared to be stifling her laughter. I wonder if something about that question tickled the chivalric spirit within her.

“Asking about my true feelings, I don’t think a question like this is something to be asking other nobles.”

After I said that with a sigh, Claudia was now making laughing sounds from the back of her throat like a cat. How noisy. In order to get rid of this annoying laughter, I think I’m going to have to answer his question, however reluctantly.

“.....Honestly speaking, I couldn’t care either way about the engagement being broken or not. My domain gains nothing either way. However, due to the large debt, if the engagement is broken, it’ll set off a chain reaction leading to downfall and ruin. There’s nothing I can do about that.”

I don’t think it’s necessary to tell them about Diferis and the terrorists, so I’ll just talk about other things in the current situation.

“Meaning?”

“.....I’ve never heard of a single successful incident where a noble son was able to properly go through the procedures and break off an engagement.”

Maybe his prodding touched a sensitive spot in me, I answered him rather bluntly. Everyone in the room dropped their shoulders sharply. If Kamil had been in the room right now, I’m sure I would have heard him whispering to me “you sure aren’t honest.”

CHAPTER 126

PREPARATIONS

I made use of everyone I could, and drastically changed my planned schedule for tomorrow. I'll go over the details later, but supporting Cornell's plan that he came up with will be convenient for me as well. Although I want to break the engagement in some way, I still intend to keep the information about Diferis a secret.

To begin with, it's strange why Viscount Ogren would ask Feria and Cornell to see him and discuss things, when he's always been so vehemently opposed to canceling the engagement.

According to what Cornell told me, the girl that Ista Ogren likes is the daughter of a western domain lord, and that domain's primary income stems from agriculture. Oscar gathered some basic information for me on that domain, but the conclusion is that there's no way that domain will have enough money to cover the Ogren family's debt to the Nordsturms.

Meaning, there's no way that Viscount Ogren asked for Feria in order to agree to cancel the engagement. Then, what exactly is he planning?

.....If something happens to Feria's engagement at this current timing, it will probably be the Rogshia family as well as me that suffer from it. The Ogren family is being supported by the powerful Nordsturm family. Even if something happens to cancel the engagement, the Ogren family is in no danger of financial ruin given their backers. The biggest victim will be the Rogshia family as it will cause their downfall, and I'd be affected by the ripples of such an outcome as well.

The Arxian nobility greatly dislike seeing the downfall of one of their own. Although legally I won't be directly responsible, it's actually a heavy responsibility that's been given to me. If the Rogshias are ruined, the other nobles are sure to assign the blame to me. I won't be able to avoid having my reputation in shambles.....

So, did Viscount Ogren summon Feria at the instruction of Marquis Nordsturm? There's a high chance that he's merely working as Nordsturm's chess piece for the sake of having Earl Terejia and I exiled from noble society.

.....Did Marquis Nordsturm anticipate that Feria would come without obtaining permission from noble school? Students inside the school are supposed to be isolated from the outside. Basically speaking, the students aren't able to obtain information from outside, the only things they hear about noble society are what their parents tell them.

But conversely, it's quite easy for those outside to learn about the affairs inside the school. There are many servants working in the noble school. They're an easy source of information.

Even I've used my personal funds to hire two commoner women working in the lecture halls for information purposes, and Earl Terejia has more than a dozen sources himself.

While the noble school itself has no direct involvement with politics, having knowledge about the future power players in the royal capital is still useful.

Since I'm primarily focused on my own domain for the time being, perhaps it's a bit early for me to have hired people inside the school already, but I want to be fully prepared for the time when I'll have to enter noble school myself.I've gone off a tangent here.

Meaning, perhaps Marquis Nordsturm found out from sources in the noble school about Feria's engagement situation, and it would have been quite easy for him to predict Feria's actions if he had Viscount Ogren call her out to discuss the engagement. Things will be even easier for him if there are Viscount Ogren's people around Feria. Because their two families are engaged, there won't even be anything suspicious about it.

I don't know the exact reason that Viscount Ogren summoned Feria over. But, it seems to me that Viscount Ogren is making moves in order to destroy the engagement between their families.

-The fact that I caught Cornell and Feria before they were able to arrive at the Ogren residence was quite a stroke of luck. But thanks to this I'm able to make a counterplay, and I'm not going to let this chance to turn everything around slip past.



For the next three days, I was consecutively absent from meetings at the House of Lords, claiming I was ill. In the meantime, the items I had prepared arrived at my residence one after the other, and one of the items I had procured, an amount of fruit, began sending sweet scents wafting through my house.

.....It will be nice if I can gain the upper hand through this. Some things depend on other parties' movements though, and I don't know what may happen in the end.

"Um....."

Feria who was sitting on the bed in the guest room, was looking at me with an incredibly awkward expression on her face. I lowered my cup of black tea, and asked her "what is it?" as I looked in her direction.

"It's about, my father's business....."

"Ahh. Did you learn more about it?"

".....Yes. It seems that, he's in the beeswax business."

.....Bees, eh.

"Beekeeping seems to be a flourishing business in the Greenfield region."

"Yes. I believe that my father raised bees also in order to join the beekeeping business. However, his bees didn't produce any honey, so he probably was forced to change to raising bees for the purpose of producing beeswax."

"Why do you think so?"

When I asked for the reason behind this, Feria seemed to consider the answer for a short while, then she hesitantly began telling me the reasons that she came up with.

"In my home..... We go a little overboard with lighting wax candles everywhere. Also, for the past five years, I often received skin care cream from my father....."

"I see."

Beeswax making, eh..... However, I still have some doubts remaining. It's reasonable to say that there's a high demand for candles. But still, Viscount Rogshia's business started out as a failure. And I've never heard anything about beeswax being a special regional product of the Rogshia domain before.

.....Something about all this bugs me. I'm really bothered by it, but I have no way to investigate it.....

Besides, right now I have to focus on the opponent I have to deal with immediately, Viscount Ogren. I pushed away my doubts to the back of my mind for the time being.

CHAPTER 127

TRAP

I heard a slight clinking sound. I stealthily walked to the window, and opened it almost imperceptibly. Through a tiny gap, I saw a man I didn't know, who wasn't one of the servants, paying close attention to his surroundings with a vigilant expression.

Without a sound, I simply dug my nails into the fruit I was holding. The fruit's aroma instantly escaped and surrounded me with a faint sweet scent.

.....Even though it's summer currently, I'm going to have to hide in a small cabinet. It's too hot. I don't want to be drenched in sweat. Plus, it's stifling. Nor is this something like hide and seek.

From outside the cabinet, I could still detect the intruder's footsteps as he furtively approached. Thanks to the sharp hearing I inherited from my father, I heard even the minute sound of him opening and closing the door.

I bit into the soft flesh of the fruit I peeled with my nails. A sweet juice began gushing out. I spit it out into my palm. A terribly thick, fruity smell was emanating from it.

Then, I finally crawled out of the cabinet. The drawing room in my house on Onboro Street was dead silent, just like usual.Other than the window that I opened, none of the furniture was moved at all.

I looked upstairs. Since I've left things there to reliable people, I probably have nothing to worry about. Even if I hear a commotion, there's no need for me to rush.

Thinking so, I began eating the fruit in my hand. It's a sweet fruit similar to a peach from my old world, and it was effective at slaking my thirst.

– I heard some cacophonous clanging for a moment, along with a scream that sounded like it came from a beast. After I confirmed that the ruckus had died down, I stood up from the sofa.

So, it finally happened. I don't know what type of person the intruder is, but it seems he must have been the cautious type. Even though my residence is so small, he's been taking his time and exploring room to room for almost an hour.

I just happened to finish eating all of the fruit. I wiped away all of the juice on my hands.

Even after I left the drawing room, it was completely quiet inside my residence. Although there were already few servants to begin with, in the daytime they typically go out to buy supplies and run other errands, so the house will be even emptier than usual. Especially since "I" went to the House of Lords today, the servants will prioritize their errands outside the residence.

I slowly went up the stairs to the second floor. The guest room right above the drawing room just happened to have its door ajar. It's the room I've lent to Feria for the past three days.

I stepped into the room. The cup of black tea that I sent Feria seems to be broken, and shards were everywhere. Also, Feria was trembling in fear at the end of the bed, while the intruder wasn't making a sound as he was currently being pressed down on the floor by two men, and a draconis.

".....Oi, you broke this cup. Weren't you told to not break anything?"

"Hey, I wasn't the one who broke it. He did it!"

Gunther made the last comment grumpily as he stepped on the male intruder with his full body weight. The man pinned to the floor was flapping his mouth, probably in pain. Wheezing sounds were coming from his throat, and he was salivating. It's clear to see that he's having difficulty breathing. With this method, his thoughts and actions are considerably restricted, and he won't be able to kill himself by biting his own tongue. It's very painful, not being able to breathe. Even if he wants to die, his body won't have enough energy to allow him to do so.

"Without letting him die, strip him naked and tie him up. Also, gag him so he can't kill himself."

"Got it."

The person who replied this time was Teo, who'd gotten used to my preferred method of treating captives already when he helped me catch the bandit group.

Finally, Rashiok who was also crushing the intruder under his massive weight looked at me proudly and barked. His tail was sweeping left and right on the floor, but being a draconis, his tail is more snakelike, so it didn't send dust flying everywhere. Rashiok was the one that smelled the fruit scent as my signal that there was an invader, so he got Gunther and the others to be on high alert. Draconis are really such clever creatures.

Since Teo and Gunther just came here, they might not know all the servants yet, and they might mistake one of them for an intruder. In order to deal with that, I decided to use the smell of fruit as a signal to Rashiok. Rashiok is able to detect the fragrance even from the second floor, so he can alert them to capture any invader.

"I think what's about to happen next will be rather unsightly, Lady Feria. Would you mind closing the curtains of the window?"

When I asked that to Feria who was still pale and trembling, her shoulders jumped. Since I never told her about the possibility of an impending attack like this, it seems she's badly in shock. All of this happened around her without her involvement, and her complexion looks almost as bad as the man on the floor.

Then, she asked me in a soft voice: "yes, um..... Can't I just leave the room now?"

"You should just stay by our side. Because of this current situation, I'm worried about leaving you by yourself. I'll just close the curtains myself. What's coming next isn't anything that unmarried women should see."

Regardless of Feria who looked like she still wanted to say something else, I closed the curtains of the window personally. Right after I closed them, Teo mercilessly ripped off the intruder's clothes.

A small cry resounded in the room. Well, for a normal noble girl like Feria, she might not even notice the sound.

As Teo tied the man as tight as he could, Rashiok continued to lean on the invader, causing him to breathe heavily. However, even through his hazy eyes and unfocused expression, I still saw confusion and surprise in them as he looked at me.

It's probably because he saw "me," together with Earl Terejia and my rather conspicuous two knights as escorts, at the House of Lords.

A child with black hair and red eyes. This is definitely information that this invader would have on me beforehand.

.....Well, that child he saw earlier was just a fake though, the real me is still here and never left my residence. My prey fell right into my trap, it was a successful strategy. It was supposed to be a great chance for them to do something to Feria with the lord and all the servants gone..... or so they thought.

"My lord, look here. This man has a family emblem embroidered in his clothes."

Teo tossed the invader's clothes to me. I confirmed that the inner lining had the Ogren family crest on it, and Gunther and Teo nodded as well.

"Indeed. Then, when you finish tying this person, put him in the winter storage room. After this, that Freche boy will be able to make his moves."

"-Is it alright to just leave that kid alone? Without seeing what's going on over there?"

"As for 'Elise,' she has her own task to fulfill."

"Have you two finally reconciled? It seems like you've been on bad terms for two years now, such a long quarrel."

"Ahh. -For a proper apology, I allowed 'her' to slap me once. I figured, why not?"

When I showed Teo and Gunther my left cheek which was swollen, they almost spat simultaneously in astonishment. "To think, that bratty kid actually just wanted to slap another child!" was Gunther's response to learning about how I made up with Ratoka.

(TL note: In case most of you, as is highly likely, forgot: Eliza saved Ratoka and spared him precisely because she noticed how similar their appearances were. She's been hiding his existence, making him dress as a girl, and spreading misleading information about his alias, 'Elise' with the goal of creating a body double for herself for future purposes, this plan was conceived right when she met him. 100+ chapters later, and Ratoka becomes her body double for the first time.)

【 PART IV 】

CHAPTER 128

CHAOTIC TRIAL, PART 1

I took Gunther's advice and handed the invader over to the military police, making this into an official investigation.

I considered the fact that the invader might have disguised himself as a servant, but his clothes are quite a standard type for those serving the lower-ranked noble families. These clothes are usually custom made to order, so there's no way a rush job could have been done just for the sake of this attack. Perhaps, knowing the high risks associated, he wore these clothes anyways thinking it would help him achieve his goal.

But since the Ogren family's crest was discovered sewn into the inner linings of his clothing, this can be treated as definitive evidence of Viscount Ogren plotting an attack, or even an assassination attempt on me.

The next evening, the following involved parties, Viscountess Kaldia, Viscount Ogren, the presumed target of the invader, Feria Rogshia, and her father Viscount Rogshia, we were all summoned to a church located in the noble district for a trial convened by the judicial branch of the priests.

This dispute between the lower-ranked nobles such as ourselves became such a huge commotion, that many other people got into an uproar as well, which caused the church to crack down upon nearly 100 illegal acts by the nobles in this short time period.

For us three viscounts, there were three priests here today, including one judge priest, and they all had extremely strict expressions as they began writing the records for today's trial.



Viscount Ogren who was basically forced to come here after falling into my trap, still appeared calm on the surface. However, the hatred in his eyes was rather unexpectedly directed in Viscount Rogshia's direction instead of mine.

As for Viscount Rogshia, he was looking back in Viscount Ogren's direction with a terribly cold look. I still don't know the exact nature of their relationship, I could only feel like I was still missing some pieces of the puzzle as I glanced back and forth between them.

Well, the actual target of the attack was Feria anyways, and I'm only technically involved because Feria was staying with me at the time of the attack. While watching sparks fly between Viscounts Ogren and Rogshia, now, how exactly should I play this out today? I thought about the hectic previous four days, and mentally went over everything that happened.

The scenario we set up was that when Feria heard that her friend Eliza Kaldia had gotten sick with a fever, she came running from noble school in order to visit. Unfortunately, my illness had been contagious, and Feria came down with a fever as well. Since she was also sick, she just remained resting at my residence instead of returning to school.

That was the "reason" that I created for Feria remaining at my residence. I sent messages to both the noble school and Viscount Rogshia informing them that she was "sick."

I sent out three other messages as well that day. One was to the House of Lords, informing them that I would be absent the next day. Another one was to Earl Terejia's residence, informing him of the current situation, my predictions for what was going to happen and letting him know about my upcoming plan. The last message was to the Kaldia domain. I summoned Ratoka, Gunther, Teo, and Rashiok to the royal capital.

"-So, when Viscountess Kaldia returned to her residence from the House of Lords, you found out that soldiers from your army staying at your residence just happened to capture an intruder."

The judge priest confirmed the situation on the day of the incident with me, and I nodded and said yes in affirmation.

“Since you were present at the House of Lords during the time of the attack, you weren’t present while the attack was taking place. It seems that most of the servants were also outside for the time being, so it’s a good thing that nothing happened to Lady Feria.”

This is what the judge believes, but of course it’s all made up. Ratoka was the one present at the House of Lords, not me, and I was personally commanding at the scene itself which led to the capture of the invader.

I snuck a glance at Feria, as she knows the truth of what happened. Yes, this is good, just keep quiet without saying anything unnecessary. And if all this manages to break the engagement to the Ogres, she can marry Cornell Freche like she wants.

“It’s time to ask you some questions, Viscount Ogen. The attacker was wearing servant clothes embroidered with the Ogen family emblem. Its authenticity has already been confirmed by our experts. It’s compelling evidence that you should also bear responsibility for this attack.”

“.....Indeed, the person who attacked the Kaldia residence was wearing servant clothes from my family. However, I have no recollection of ever hiring someone like that. If you check my employee ledgers in my residence, I’m sure you can find that out for yourself.”

Viscount Ogen was pretending to be hurt by this accusation. “I see,” said the judge. I’m actually slightly impressed that Viscount Ogen already faked some documents in his residence, with only one day to prepare, in case of a search. Even if we search his whole house, it probably means that nothing strange will be found.

Viscount Roghia just kept glaring nonstop at Viscount Ogen. I suppose I should give him credit for being a noble as well, he seems like a completely different person from having that gentle demeanor when I first met him.

“Besides, what reason could I possibly have for attacking my own son’s fiancée?”

“I don’t know what you tried to do to my daughter, but I can certainly think of a motive, Viscount Ogen.”

At hearing Viscount Roghia’s icy voice, Viscount Ogen’s reaction was almost comical as he took a defensive posture.

“I myself intend to file an official complaint against Viscount Ogren as well. There was a serious problem with the business that we jointly ran together – because Viscount Ogren intentionally started this issue. I’m certain that he must have been trying to threaten my daughter in order for me to not file an accusation.”

CHAPTER 129

CHAOTIC TRIAL, PART 2

“What are you talking about, I don’t understand!”

Viscount Ogren laughed off Viscount Rogshia’s accusation. Since he must have cleaned up his house of any incriminating evidence, he appeared supremely confident. His eyes were still sharp and he scoffed while he directly met Viscount Rogshia’s glare.

“Exactly what have I done? I’ve dedicated myself to supporting your business over all these years as well. Plus, your business is even turning a profit these days -”

“Viscount Ogren, please don’t interrupt. Give Viscount Rogshia a chance to state his accusation.”

Although Viscount Ogren was eloquently defending himself, the judge priest stopped him from speaking any further. Viscount Ogren stopped talking, and glared at the judge in annoyance. The military police member standing behind Viscount Ogren clanged his spear loudly against the stone ground as if to threaten him, and he finally became obedient.

“Then, Viscount Rogshia. Please continue what you were just saying.”

When the judge urged Viscount Rogshia to continue, he seemed to realize as if he was about to do something truly frightening by making this accusation. His face was turning incredibly pale, and his shoulders were shaking. Feria next to him seemed puzzled by this, but she held his arm in support, and he finally opened his mouth again.

“Yes.I’m accusing Viscount Ogren because during the course of our partnership in the beeswax business, our beeswax showed poisoning symptoms.”

“Poisoning symptoms? Is that..... really true?”

For what the judge probably expected to be a small, simple trial, he must have never expected to hear a word like poison being thrown around. The judge’s face was full of shock and doubt.

“Yes. Although weak, people started developing a dependency on the beeswax – and Viscount Ogren was responsible for the manufacturing process. He signed off on our contract that he would guarantee the safety of the manufacturing process.”

As Viscount Rogshia finally began his case against Viscount Ogren, a perceptive military police member held out a cup of black tea for me while I was feeling like none of this had to do with me anymore. He drank a few drops of the tea himself first, as if to assure me there was no poison. As expected of military police in the royal capital. They’ve undergone excellent training, it was quite smart of him to do.

Well then, as I elegantly sipped on my black tea, Viscount Rogshia’s story was causing the three priests’ faces to turn pale as he continued. According to him, they started producing the addictive beeswax five years ago, and the wholesale routes were left to Viscount Ogren. Apart from the addictive beeswax, they also produced ordinary beeswax for trading, and the production method for the two types of beeswax wasn’t really all that different, except that one was an addictive substance.

“What exactly are the specific differences between the two types of beeswax?”

“Well..... roughly speaking, resin produced by the Renvia fruit is added to the production process.”

“Renvia? It couldn’t be. That plant isn’t poisonous at all.”

The judge priest was furrowing his eyebrows. Indeed, the Renvia flowers themselves certainly aren’t toxic in any way whatsoever. As a popular horticultural species grown in many gardens, any poisonous properties would have been discovered long ago.

“Well, what happens is..... When you mix the resin produced by ripe Renvia fruits together with honey and burn it, the smoke has addictive properties.”

“That’s certainly something I’ve never heard about before.....”

“When the Renvia fruit is ripe, it will release a pungent smell that strongly affects the senses. I’ve been cultivating them so that we’ll always have a stockpile of ripe fruit ready to harvest any time we need to.”

“Ah..... I see.”

Well, the judge priest most likely doesn't have any experience with gardening, as he was only nodding ambiguously. On the other hand, the two priests probably have to take care of plants in the monastery, they were nodding more affirmatively.

"Indeed, if what you say is true and you can prove that this manufacturing process creates an addictive beeswax, Viscount Ogren will be charged with fraud against Viscount Rogshia, and also narcotics trafficking within Arxia. I think that you wouldn't be able to avoid drug charges either, though....."

"Please wait, I didn't participate in such a thing at all! All of this is nonsense by Viscount Rogshia. I don't have any specialized knowledge about plants. It's inconceivable for me to have manufactured such a drug."

Viscount Ogren's insufferable voice loudly interrupted at this point again.

"Also, you priests should know already! The fact that a few days ago, I secretly accused Viscount Rogshia of tax evasion. He's just trying to cover his own crimes by blaming me!"

"What!?"

At hearing Viscount Ogren firmly accuse him, Viscount Rogshia who had remained calm up until now stood up from his seat.

While continuing to sip on the delicious black tea that the military police member gave me, I gave a hand signal to Oscar who was behind me, as we may have to intervene in this chaotic situation soon.

Adults are all liars, it's impressive, really. About this entire incident, there were limits to what information I could gather with my own resources, so I had to rely on Earl Terejia's information network, through which I learned all about the ugly truth behind the conflict between the two viscounts. It's amazing how silver tongued people can be, lying with such straight faces.

CHAPTER 130

FIRE

Both Viscount Rogshia and Ogren's tales were full of exaggerations and lies. In the first place, both of them were in on creating this addictive substance together, purely out of the ugly desire to make profits in any way possible, and now that it's been exposed, they're both trying to make sure the other one takes the fall.

Secretly creating drugged candles with beeswax, drug smuggling, tax evasion..... Any argument they had on the surface about their children's engagement was only camouflage for their secret activities, a deep swamp that I've been dragged into because I found what was truly going on behind what appeared to be a simple engagement conflict.

How long is this farce going to continue for, I wonder.

All the evidence that Earl Terejia helped me gather of their illegal acts, I modified the evidence so that it would benefit Viscount Rogshia, and I'll submit it to the priests when they're finished with their arguments.

The fact will remain that Viscount Rogshia still has a large debt, but the person truly holding the key to Viscount Rogshia's future prospects is Earl Freche. For the mere price of 20 million arcs, a paltry sum to him at least, Earl Freche will be able to acquire large amounts of fertile land in the Greenfield region and extensive beekeeping facilities. It's good for all of us that Earl Freche accepted his youngest son Cornell's plan to pay off Viscount Rogshia's debt and essentially gain control of the Rogshia domain.

The crookedness of the Ogren family surely must be connected to the main family behind them, the Nordsturms. Earl Terejia wants to find a concrete connection somewhere so that he can drag Marquis Nordsturm in front of the House of Lords, so this time I'm acting as Earl Terejia's chess piece with this final objective in mind.

.....It seems that the issue between the Ogrens and the Rogshias will come to a close soon. However, I felt an unexpected uncomfortable feeling in my ear, so I raised my head instinctively.

“Is something the matter?”

Maybe it was too much of a sudden movement, the priests that were coldly and calmly listening to the viscounts argue, and even the two viscounts that had been verbally sparring so viciously, everyone in the room’s attention was pulled to me. I could hear a high-pitched tone in the distance, increasing in volume, causing my ears to tremble slightly.

“.....I think, there may be some sort of commotion outside?”

“Eh?”

One of the priests quickly signaled a guard standing in front of the door to this room, who opened the door.

At that instant, all of us could clearly hear some sort of commotion. Also, there was some sort of strange sound in the air, almost like the rustling of leaves.

Exactly at this time, guards from outside panickily rushed into the room, shouting “it’s a fire! There’s a fire near us! Evacuate to somewhere safe!”

Everyone stood up in unison. If this is just a simple fire though, this other sound we’re hearing is still too strange.

“Since this is an emergency situation, this trial will end for the time being. Everyone, follow me.”

One of the priests who looked absolutely ashen lead the way, while guards escorted both viscounts. Since Feria still looked lost about what was going on, I pulled on her arm. Since I gave a hand signal to Oscar for him to go fetch the documentary evidence against Viscount Ogren and we’re currently separated, will we be able to meet up later properly? He shouldn’t be that far away.

.....But anyways, what an inconvenient timing for such a ruckus. I hope that this doesn’t have a negative impact on resolving this incident.

At a brisk pace, I walked out of the church temple for the trial. What I saw next made me doubt my eyes, and everyone was speechless.

The sky itself was crimson. Although it was evening, the air itself appeared to be burning. From the direction of the commoners' district, black smoke could be seen rising here and there, and sparkling fiery powder could be seen glittering everywhere in the air.

"Are these..... fire moths? It couldn't be. Such an enormous amount?"

Viscount Rogshia made that comment in a daze. Well, I felt the same way he did as I looked up at the sky.

A crimson sky. There's an uncountable number of fire moths swirling about, dancing in the sky.

With their strange buzzing, wherever the fire moths swarmed like waves over the commoners' buildings, a new fire would vigorously sprout. Screams are echoing everywhere. Everyone was lost for words at this abnormal situation.

"Exactly what is going on here?"

"At any rate, let's evacuate from here..... this area is dangerous."

It happened right when the priest turned around. Suddenly a great force hit me, and my body struck a wall. Due to the shock of the impact, I couldn't breathe for a moment. I limply fell down to the ground against the wall, as I couldn't summon up any energy.

"Nobody move! Don't move!!"

Someone is now pressing up against me forcefully on my back. It's Viscount Ogren, who's even louder than before and sounds almost hysterical. When I somehow managed to turn my head around, I also saw two unfamiliar men in black clothing removing their swords from the guards' bodies that they just ambushed.

Feria's screaming pierced through the air. I also saw Viscount Rogshia collapsing to the ground without uttering a sound.

"What is all this!!"

Those were the last words that the judge priest ever said. Buzz, as the fire moths approached us, he met his end and was wiped out of existence instantly.

This temple's garden began smoldering as well. As the fire started spreading here as well, it reached the tunic of one of the dead guards on the ground. I could only watch the licks of fire expanding in blank amazement.

"How excellent. All of you can just be burned alive by this fire!"

Viscount Ogren's screaming voice was overjoyed as he kept stepping on my back, and a moment right after I felt something cold on the back of my left hand –

"Uu, ahhhhhhh!!!"

Sweat started trickling down my entire body as I was racked in pain and screamed instinctively. My left hand is so hot. It's burning with pain. Viscount Ogren had taken a spear from one of the dead guards, and stabbed it through my left hand, pinning it to the ground.

The viscount's crazed laughter as he ran off even drowned out the sounds of Feria trying to struggle and escape the grasp of one of the black-clad attackers. The crackling sounds of fire, screaming, and the buzzing of the fire moths, at any rate I was surrounded by nothing but horrible sounds, and my left hand's pain would soon become the least of my worries.

CHAPTER 131

FINDING REFUGE

I grinded my teeth, and grabbed the spear sticking out of my left hand with my right hand. It was difficult to catch my breath because of all the impacts my body had just received. I could hear unpleasant sounds as the fingers in my left hand began cramping terribly.

It seems that at least the spear's blade avoided piercing any of my bones. This is fortunate. If my bones had been broken as well, I would be even more sluggish and nauseous.

I tried to pull the spear out of me. My palm was slippery with sweat, and it was difficult to get a good grip. Because of the fire's close proximity to me, impatience and anxiety spread all through my body. If I don't hurry, I'll be burned to death..... There's also several people fallen around me.

I could still see signs of life in the priest on the ground close to me. Viscount Rogshia is probably still alive as well. It's too late for the others. Someone seems to have stuck a blade through the judge priest's heart just to make extra sure he was dead, and both guards are dead as well.

At the very least, I have to make sure this priest lives. If he makes it out of this alive, he can send Viscount Ogren to be executed.Well, before all that, I have to solve my own urgent situation first.

But, I don't have the strength to remove a heavy metallic spear with only a single hand and the strength of a young child. I'm burning up with impatience. Just thinking about the possibility of the fire moths getting any closer to here sends chills running down my spine. I should be trying to calm down and catch my breath, but on the contrary I'm getting all heated up.

The smell of burnt flesh caused me to recall unpleasant memories, and I felt disgusted. I don't need additional reasons other than heat and pain to cause me to sweat right now.

Calm down..... Calm down, me. How about I just take drastic measures, and try ripping the spear out of my flesh, even if it tears my fingers off? At the very worst, maybe I won't be able to use my middle finger, ring finger, and little finger for the rest of my life, but that's probably still better than dying here being burned alive. Plus, my left hand isn't even my dominant hand.

“-Eliza!”

Just when I was thinking about sacrificing some fingers, how fortunate for me, I heard a voice calling for me from the sky.

It was so unexpected for me to hear this voice, that I almost called him by his real name, but I managed to stop myself. I don't want to get into another argument with him.

“.....'Elise,' I'm here!”

Swoosh, the fire moths scattered. As Rashiook landed, a child with remarkably similar black hair and scarlet eyes to me rushed by my side. He looked at the spear stuck into my hand and his expression distorted, then he grabbed the spear handle with both hands and pulled it out of the ground.

Blood is now falling to the ground with a pitter patter sound. An intense pain and numbness is causing my wrist to shake. I tore my cloak into strips with my mouth and right hand, and I had Ratoka help me tie the cloth strips around my hand and stop the bleeding, then I also had Ratoka carry the priest to Rashiook's back as well. I had Rashiook carry Viscount Rogshia gently in his mouth, while the rest of us rode on Rashiook's back as he soared through the air.

I can hear the sounds of the wind blowing past us. Even though we're flying straight in the middle of so many fire moths, none of them can approach us at all, probably because of the fact that Rashiook can control the wind with his magic.

When I looked down at the royal capital's downtown area, it was truly in a terrible condition. There were groups of people everywhere, trying to escape the fire moths through narrow alleyways. Fire and black smoke was everywhere, and there were constant screams of despair and anger.

“You, how come you're here?”

“Rashiok suddenly..... made me get on his back and flew off from your residence.”

Is that so, I nodded. Ratoka actually didn't know what was going on. It was Rashiok that decided to move on his own. I would have preferred Teo or Gunther to Ratoka, honestly, but what most likely happened was that the moment Rashiok noticed something was going on, he probably just found the closest person and brought him here to me, so I can't complain. I felt a bit relieved, and stroked Rashiok's neck with my fingertips.

“Oi, don't move your injured hand.”

“The bleeding has stopped. I'm fine. It shouldn't get worse unless I move my palm around.”

My tightly wrapped left hand had already stopped bleeding. I pushed the throbbing pain out of my consciousness and instructed Rashiok to land on the waterway. Since fire moths are weak against water, they shouldn't be close to the waterway. There were many commoners that had escaped the fire moths standing in the water, shivering in fear.

“Ratoka, take care of the injured people we brought. Don't let them die. Especially this priest.”

I suddenly gave Ratoka an order, and removed the remnants of my cloak that was interfering with my movement, and pressed it into Ratoka's arms telling him he could use it for bandages. Eh, was all that Ratoka could say, as I dropped him off on the high ground together with the two unconscious men.

“Don't leave the waterway. The fire moths won't approach here.”

“Where are you going, with such an injury!”

“Viscount Ogren escaped and took Feria Rogshia with him. I'm going after them.”

“What!?” I soon put Ratoka's shouting behind me, as I ordered Rashiok to fly again. Once again I felt the wind's roar, as well as the internal sensation of my organs floating.

CHAPTER 132

SCARLET BLOOD-RED EYES

“Follow Feria’s scent, hurry!”

They shouldn’t have been able to go far yet. With this much chaos, and how conspicuous they would be, they would probably be noticed by someone everywhere they go. Especially in the noble district.

But, I don’t know the identity of the two men in black clothes, and I can’t be certain that Viscount Ogren and Feria are together. That’s why I want Rashiok to hurry as much as possible.

Rashiok landed on a street in the commoners’ district where the fire was weak, then took off running down the street. Occasionally he pushed some packs of fire moths away with gusts of wind, and ran down an empty road.

I finally realized that there was something strange about the fire moths’ movements. They were still gathering on the edges of Rashiok’s control over the wind in groups, but they weren’t moving in waves anymore.

There’s something unnatural about all this, is what I think. The abnormal behavior of magical beasts has been continuing for the past few years. But, such behavior that clearly deviates so far from their natural behavior, shouldn’t happen unless it’s the prelude to some sort of calamity. All the knowledge I’ve accumulated about magical beasts is telling me something’s off.

It’s **absolutely impossible** for the fire moths to cause such a major incident, based on their biological behavior.

-Then, this incident must be the work of a human.

I had a flashback to what happened three years ago. A magical beast that left the Monster Forest and entered a human structure, the monster baboon. It had seemed to get excited over human blood. But considering that beast’s original nature, that shouldn’t have been possible.

Although monster baboons have high intelligence, it's still a magical beast. Its inherent nature is that of an animal. In other words, for it to have been hunting humans that aren't its food in a building that was currently burning goes against all the laws of nature.

When something that cannot naturally occur does occur, the cause will almost certainly be due to humans. I don't know how they do it, but there must be a person somewhere that has a technique to make monsters and magical beasts run rampant. As I got lost in my thoughts, Rashiok gave me a low growl.

"You found them?"

I unsheathed the sword fastened to my waist. It's only a ceremonial light sword, but it will still suffice as a weapon.

In a small plaza with a fountain, I saw two men dressed in black. One was carrying Feria on his back, and the other was vigilantly watching the surroundings while holding a spear.

I could also see two shadows on the other side of the fountain.Viscount Ogren was the only person I couldn't see. But he wasn't alone, there was the shadow of someone else there, presuming one of the shadows was Viscount Ogren.

First I must consider, is it really necessary to rescue Feria? I can't do anything if I'm worried about the fact that they have a hostage. -In my opinion, it'll be difficult to steal her from them.

"Go, Rashiok. It's time to hunt."

The man hurriedly swung his spear at Rashiok when he finally noticed us ambushing him, but it bounced off his scales uselessly as Rashiok bit into his unarmored arm. The momentum from the collision threw him into the fountain, causing water to splash all over.

Simultaneously, I jumped off of Rashiok's back, and I aimed directly with my short sword to pierce through the man carrying Feria.

I'm not worried about the fate of the hostage, but I must bear the full brunt of my choices. This is a realization that I've come to after reincarnating.

A strange sound spewed out from the mouth of the man whose shoulder I pierced through completely, causing life to leave his body, as I also peeled FERIA off of him. FERIA screamed as we hit the ground together rolling, and I used her to absorb some of the impact from hitting the ground. After all, since I'm still only nine years old currently, it would be difficult for me to do something like actually carry a girl that's sixteen like FERIA by myself.

"Get down."

Giving blunt instructions that get straight to the point has become my habit already. As FERIA tried to get up while just looking at me in amazement, I stepped over to the person that RASHIOK bit to death, and took his spear. Well, it's a little heavy for me, but it'll do.

At that moment, I heard the sound of a heavy object falling into the fountain and water splashing again. On the other side of the curtain of water droplets falling like rain, two people were coming in my direction.

".....Well, well. Eliza KALDIA. I didn't expect to meet you so soon. You're really so similar to your father, who enjoyed killing people in such a garish manner."

I heard a man laughing gloomily, which gave me an eerie sensation of familiarity, and when the water droplets stopped falling and I saw the man who had just been speaking, that's when it hit me.

I couldn't do anything but stand there stunned.

While his black hair was wet from the water, his dazzling scarlet blood-red eyes were exactly the same shade that I loathed to look at every time I saw myself in a mirror.

For an instant, I almost thought I really was looking into a mirror. However, the clothes and hairstyle were different. Also, this person had the same crazed aura about him as a person from my memory.

"..... F, father?"

Is this some sort of nightmare that I can't get away from, that's come into the world of reality? As the man slowly turned his head towards me and I got a clearer look, he appeared more and more reminiscent of my late father.

CHAPTER 133

BROTHER AND SISTER, OR MAYBE UNCLE AND NIECE

Clang, the spear I was holding slid down my palm and rattled against the stone ground. The sound brought me back to sanity, and I hurriedly gripped the spear properly again.

This man who resembled my father to such a great degree, was rolling Viscount Ogren's body with his feet quite casually as he approached me slowly.

-The viscount. The sound I heard earlier of something falling into the fountain must have been him. He's drenched in water, and I can also see a dark red color spreading.

Was Viscount Ogren killed by this man I wonder, and just as I was realizing that my head still wasn't able to get a grasp on this situation quite yet, Viscount Ogren's right hand lifted up weakly and grabbed the hem of the blood-red-eyed man's pants.

"Why, you, Nor..... dstur..... do this..... to me!"

He's having difficulty speaking clearly, but I was still able to hear him as he sent water droplets flying. I think he probably took a blow to his head. Too much information to process..... rather than processing information that I can't understand right now, it's probably better to stop thinking about it entirely for the time being.

Just now, what did Viscount Ogren call this man? Did he refer to him as a Nordsturm?

"Melchior, is that the child? You two really do look alike."

The chuckling sound of a woman I didn't know cut through the air. The woman who had been standing behind the blood-red-eyed man stepped out in front, all while casually grinding her foot into Viscount Ogren's head. The viscount groaned once, then fell silent.

She's a rather tall woman wrapped in a simple traveler's cloak. I can't tell the color of her eyes because most of her face is covered by a cloth, but going by her smooth tan

brown skin that she exposed so casually on her belly and thighs, she's definitely not from Arxia.

".....Just who are you guys?"

When I asked who they were, they looked at each other. Then, they suddenly started laughing.

"Listen up closely, little child. This man here is Marquis Melchior Nordsturm. He's got a much higher rank than you. Don't you think you should be showing a little more respect?"

With her annoying laughter all throughout introducing her companion, the woman used a high-pitched tone of voice that almost sounded like she was singing.

-Ridiculous. Marquis Nordsturm..... Really? This man who's obviously some relative of mine is a Nordsturm? Just the fact that his family name is Nordsturm is shocking enough, but he also has the high noble rank of a Marquis? Confusion and surprise is whirling through my head right now.

In the first place, none of my relatives other than me should have survived. -It can't possibly be, did I fail to kill one back then?

I looked directly at the man again. I gripped the spear tightly with my right hand. While this man looked exactly the same as my father did, almost as if it were a photograph, there's clearly a point of difference. It's his age.

I can tell that this man looks a bit younger than my father from my memories. I think he's probably about fifteen years older than me. I can't imagine him being more than twenty years my elder.

"Don't stare at me like that, Eliza. Isn't this the first family meeting for us~? Isn't that right? My sister. Or perhaps you're my niece?"

I got goosebumps on my flesh. So he's acknowledged and knows that we're related in some way.....

A strong feeling of disgust was welling up within my chest, and gathering at my throat. It feels like my insides are tossing and turning, and it was getting difficult for me to keep my balance, so I supported my body by leaning against the spear.

However, I couldn't bear the disgust and nausea any longer, and I leaned over and vomited right on the spot. It wasn't just once, either, I vomited several times, to the point where I emptied my entire stomach and my body was cramping up.

"Oh my, it seems I'm so disliked to the extent that you even vomited. Such a pity. I had always looked forward to meeting you though, since you're the person my father pays the most attention to."

His tone of voice was that of getting excited and having a lot of fun. Just this alone further increased my nausea. Things are swirling in my head right now. My father's maniacal voice is forcibly coming back to me.

Before I realized it, Rashioke had crawled beside me, and was barking at the two of them as if to intimidate. Suddenly a gust of wind blew, and both of them almost lost their footing.

The cloth covering the woman's face was blown away, and I could see her face clearly now. She had the distinct look of someone from the eastern countries, sharp features, and for some reason, the left side of her face was strangely distorted.

It's a chalk tattoo. It's a complex pattern, while the right half of her face only had a cross of some sort drawn on it, which also spread to and was repeated again on her arms and legs.

"Oh, wow. You have quite the exotic pet, little kid. I'm jealous~."

The woman's lighthearted tone of voice as if she was merely bantering resounded through my ears. I forced myself to swallow down any feelings of nausea, pursed my lips, and looked directly at the woman. When she noticed my attention, she smiled creepily again.

"I'm so jealous, you should lend him to me. I want to have some fun, too~."

Although she was empty-handed, the woman reached out to Rashioke with both her hands. Then, although I almost doubted my eyes – the toxic purple tattoos on her body began glowing.

"You may want to play, but we need to leave here soon, Diferis."

“I know, Melchior. Just for a little while. Just let me play for a little while, until that little kid’s heart gets completely shattered into pieces.”

With signs of madness in her eyes as she looked directly at me, her smile was warping to an incredible extent. Exactly what is she planning to do? I increased my level of vigilance, and readied my spear.

This man just called her Diferis. Meaning, this woman is the foreign church terrorist that’s infiltrated Arxia for so long.

“Alright, let’s have a little fun with your pet, shall we!?”

At the same instant that the woman was crowing with her annoying voice, that’s when it happened. Suddenly, Rashiok who was next to me emitted a scream, and fell down on the spot.

CHAPTER 134

CRAZED KILLING INTENT, PART 1

“Rashiok.....!? You bastard, what did you do!”

I aimed my spear directly at her neck in an effort to pierce her through. While Diferis did open her eyes and see me coming, all she did was tilt her head backwards.

Before I was able to strike her throat with my spear tip, a sword interrupted me from the side, and I glared at the man who interfered. Using the momentum of my thrust, I turned my body around and the centrifugal force from my spear was threatening enough that both of them jumped backwards instantly.

“Oh no, you’re actually surprisingly strong.”

“She’s merciless. There’s something messed up about her, that’s why she can kill people without any hesitation. It’s proof that she’s inherited more traits from her crazy father than anyone else.”

The man – Melchior seemed to be delighted as he said those words, and even though my logic knows that he’s just trying to shake me mentally, it still had its effect and I could feel my brain going numb.

Calling my father crazy, saying there’s something messed up about me – shut up, even if he doesn’t say such things, even if it’s disgusting, I still mentally acknowledge it – thinking so, I couldn’t help it anymore and began grinding my back teeth loudly.

Let me analyze the situation. A two against one battle will be almost hopeless for me, but with Rashiok currently fallen down, I don’t have any other choices. I tried to regulate my breathing as much as I possibly could, so that I could calm down and stay in control.

“.....You don’t need to glare at me with such a scary face, little kid. You have a different opponent.”

Dark red blood was flowing from her tattoos now, and Diferis's distorted face was showing signs of pain while still laughing somehow. She was holding both her arms out to empty space. A demonic glow was tracing patterns in midair.

With a rumble, the ground suddenly shook, then Rashiok behind me slowly stood up.

"Rash-"

I was interrupted before I could finish calling out to him, normally he should have replied with his typical bark, but this time his huge body came hurtling straight at me.

".....Rashiok?"

I called out his name again in a daze, there's clearly something wrong with him. He fell down to the ground again, moaning painfully while pawing the ground in front of him with his front legs. He's frothing from his mouth, and his pupils are extremely dilated, as if he's in a state of terrible excitement.

Exactly what is going on here? Suddenly, my hairs all stood up on end, and I got a bad feeling about all this.

"Hehehehe. Alright then, let's begin playing with your cute pet~!"

Diferis started her grating laughter again, and she began swinging her arms. It's almost like she was dancing, while drawing ominous purple trails through the air.

Rashiok stood up again, and turned towards me. I could tell from his eyes that he was no longer in control of himself, he was dripping slimy pieces of drool, and roaring at me.

I saw nothing but white. I barely managed to dodge Rashiok charging at me, I was basically moving unconsciously.

"Rashiok-"

I could hardly believe what was happening, and I tried calling out to him again. Once again, Rashiok moaned in agony, and he rubbed his head against the ground as if to clear his head of any confusion. At this obvious act of resistance, Diferis's mocking laughter became even higher-pitched.

“As expected of a relative to dragons! It actually has quite some ability to resist!!”

This woman who's prancing around with blood coming out of her face and neck, dirtying her whole body, is such an incredibly distasteful existence. She's incomprehensible, and of course, what humans can't understand is usually frightening to them.

This woman, she's definitely controlling Rashiok.

Could it really be? Is such an outlandish thing even possible? Being able to control the wills of other living creatures, such a thing – although a little part of me inside still wanted to deny it, in the edge of my vision, I saw the fire moths still in the sky, dancing and spreading fires everywhere in the commoners' district.

“.....You, can, control magical beasts?”

Can she use magic, just like Rashiok who's able to manipulate the wind?

On my way to this fountain plaza, I'd already considered the possibility that the abnormal behavior of the fire moths was caused by a human. And, I also remembered about the monster baboon that appeared where it shouldn't have been.

At that moment, my vision was dyed pure red.

I put all of my strength into my right arm, and threw my spear. It drew a black line as it flew, and pierced through the woman's right thigh, causing a spurt of fresh blood to come out in mist form.

Her cackling laughter turned into screaming. “Diferis!” Melchior lost his calm demeanor for the first time, as he called out to her.

My lips are smiling, drowning in this brutal pleasure, that's so heavy and dark, just like oil. When I traced my left hand's fingers along my cheek, I noticed that I also had a terribly distorted smile on my face.

Heh heh, some laughter escaped from me as well. It feels like my insides are boiling, it's painful to the point where I'm wondering if my body is beginning to fester, but contrary to all that it feels like my head is encased in ice, I've never felt such a chilling coldness before.

My ears are ringing harshly. I'm feeling wondrous, as if I'm floating and not connected to the ground. My murky emotions discharged themselves from my body by turning into a low-pitched laughter.

I stepped on the head of the corpse which just happened to be close by, and pulled out my light sword that I had just stuck through his neck and shoulder earlier. At this time, Diferis also managed to pull out the spear from her own leg, and threw it on the ground with a clang. Her expression is painted over now with anger and humiliation, and she was glaring at me with hatred and murderous intent. I could feel my lips turning even further upwards.

This woman, was directly responsible for Kamil's death. At thinking so, my muddy feelings that I couldn't describe just began overflowing. Even Rashiok's suffering disappeared from my mind.

"I will kill you."

As my atrocious declaration echoed, I could feel my brain reaching subzero levels.

CHAPTER 135

CRAZED KILLING INTENT, PART 2

As Diferis rose both her hands up again, I rushed directly for her with my short sword in hand. I aimed for her stomach, but just like I expected, a sword interfered from the side again. I heard the sound of someone clicking their tongue in impatience, before a metallic clang from our swords colliding drowned out all other sounds.

I suddenly had the idea to stomp on the stone that the spear happened to be resting on close to me, causing it to bounce up into my hand. At seeing this, as if she wanted to escape, Diferis hurriedly backed away from me.

“.....Urgh, this shitty brat.....!!”

At the moment that Melchior jumped backwards and seemed to be rubbing his sword, Rashiok roared from behind me as he soared into the sky. I grabbed some mud in my left hand, and targeted his eyes.

I listened to my draconis crying painfully from having his eyes blinded in a surprisingly cold, detached manner. I aimed for a spot slightly away from his nose, and smacked him with the blunt side of my sword without hesitation. Some of his sparkling scales fell off in front of me.

However, I wasn't able to avoid his wing that struck my left shoulder. My arm started swinging loosely, and I definitely heard an unpleasant cracking sound from my shoulder.

I was feeling sharp pain and numbness in tandem, and I also found that I wasn't able to control my left arm anymore.

.....Has my shoulder been dislocated? It's fine if it's only a subluxation, but a complete dislocation will be quite bothersome.

“Ahh, Diferis. I think you've really gone and done something unnecessary here-”

As Melchior aimed for my leg with his sword, his voice was tinged with frustration. I kicked the ground with my shoes, jumping up as high as I could, and directly targeted his red eyes with my sword tip.

He twisted his body and face as much as he possibly could, causing all the water still clinging to his hair to scatter about, and since his long black hair was swinging freely in front of me, I took the opportunity to grab his hair.

With a ka-shing sound, I almost sliced off part of his head. Melchior's face was painfully distorted as he cut off his own hair to get away from me, and my short sword also managed to graze him on his ear.

"Urk!!"

He let out a shriek. I analyzed him coolly, as if I was a hunter who was observing her prey, and came to the conclusion that he wasn't used to fighting. Also, he didn't seem to have much killing intent towards me. So, they probably didn't intend to kill anyone at this location.

How convenient for me. If they're still going easy on me, then it may be possible after all to kill them.

"Melchior!"

Diferis entered the fray again with a short sword in her hand. Compared to her more practical weapon, my short sword is ceremonial in nature, a rapier. I ducked the blade clearly meant to cut off my head, scooped up some more mud and aimed straight for the fresh wound on her right thigh.

"Gah, you!!"

With the next swing of her blade, she sliced directly at my left arm that was hanging limply. I completely ignored the threat, and flicked my rapier upwards, stabbing directly at her face.

I heard her scream again. It seems that I've managed to cut open the left side of her face. As if she just realized for the first time she could possibly lose, she backed away and put as much distance between us as possible.

Without any hesitation, I fell back as well, to take this chance to rest for a small moment after their combined attacks.

Also at this time, I started tearing off the high collar of my coat with my teeth. I leaned my rapier against my left hand's fingers, and now that my right hand was empty, I grabbed my left shoulder. I felt my joint that was clearly displaced and slowly, forcefully pushed it back into place with all my strength. The pain was even more severe than when it got dislocated, sweat started pouring out all over as if my body was a raincloud. Click, a loud and horrifying sound echoed throughout my body, and the pain when it popped back in made me white out for an instant.

I had an awful feeling like I was about to vomit once again, and what little remained in my stomach came flowing up into my mouth. My throat was burning. I spat out the contents of my mouth quickly, and returned my sword to my right hand, in combat position.

My breathing was so ragged, that I forced myself to take a deep breath. My body is wobbly. I wonder if I'm somewhat overdoing it.

As for Diferis, she was also treating her injuries while keeping watch on me. I could see her hand trembling violently as she covered her left eye with her hand, and she was glaring at me furiously, like some sort of wild beast, panting uncontrollably. There's zero sign of the mocking laughter from earlier.

"Diferis."

From behind Diferis, while holding a hand over his bleeding ear, Melchior kept his cool as he talked to her.

"We're just about out of time, we need to get going."

The primal expression on Diferis's face distorted momentarily. I wonder if they're going to be late for something really important to them, she kicked the ground in frustration, then swiftly acted again. She shook those mysterious tattoos on her body again, and waved her fingers in my direction.

This time it wasn't Rashiok that moved, instead it was the mass of fire moths still floating in the sky. Without being deterred by the fact that water was still everywhere after being splashed out from the fountain, the fire moths formed into a huge dark clump and flew straight in my direction. I splashed myself with as much water from

the fountain as I could before they got here, then reflexively covered my face with my arms. Soon, I saw and felt nothing but fire moths all around me. I heard their wet wings crashing into me one after the other, then falling onto the ground. As I expected, because I'm still wet from being splashed, they aren't able to start a fire on me. Although they can't really do anything to me right now, as they're mostly harmless when their fire magic is negated, and they die when they come into contact with water, there's so many of them that it's difficult for me to move.

While I was being surrounded by the leafy sounds of the fire moths' buzzing, I heard a girl's high-pitched screaming.

-It's Feria. I couldn't help it and mentally cursed myself. Even though she should have been close by still, right now I can't even stretch out my hands, and I'm so covered in moths that I don't even know which direction is which currently.

"See ya, little kid!"

In Diferis's parting remark, I could detect anger, contempt, and even regret that she wasn't able to stay.

Finally, the fire moths all died off after coming into contact with the water on my body, and I was able to see Melchior and Diferis's backs in the distance. I also saw what appeared to be Feria in Diferis's arms.

I swept away all the dead moths that had accumulated on my body, and used a coat from one of the dead men in black to wrap all the dead moths in. Then, I inspected my rapier. It has a dark aura about it now – but I was interrupted by Rashiok who was glaring at me with bloodshot eyes, and frothing saliva was dripping everywhere from his mouth again.

"Rashiok-"

This time when I called him, he didn't rub his head against the ground in confusion. As if he had gone rabid, just like a wild beast, he opened his jaws wide and jumped straight for me.

CHAPTER 136

STRUGGLE TO THE DEATH

It's quite obvious that if Rashiok manages to bite me, I'll die. I was calmer than I expected as my brain continued to work.

I barely managed to escape Rashiok's charging, by rolling on the ground. However, his snake-like tail came crashing into my left side at a frightening speed, and my light body was blown away.

"Urk, oof.....!"

My body was tossed and turned on the muddy ground several times, bouncing up and down. My body was making unpleasant rattling sounds. Even though I still hadn't recovered from the impact yet, I got up again as soon as my body stopped rolling. I held my sword in front of myself defensively, and prepared myself for Rashiok's next attack.

My heart felt so dry, like it was splitting into pieces, a terrible feeling. When I wiped some of the mud off of my face with my left arm, I felt a stinging pain. My entire body was aching.Now then, how can I make it out of this situation alive?

Rashiok seemed to be in a bad mood as he watched me and shook his tail back and forth. Even though Diferis has completely left this location by now, he still isn't returning to normal.

Is this a complete brainwashing, then? For all sorts of magical monsters and beasts, making them ignore their inner natures, and giving them amnesia..... It's definitely not an ability that can be explained by anything other than magic.

While I think that the concept of magicians is a bit ridiculous, I acknowledge that magic definitely exists in this world. The ice lizard that froze an entire forest, Rashiok and his wind magic, and the fire moths. While there are monsters and beasts that can use magic, there's never been any evidence that humans can cast magic.

"Rashiok, please turn back to normal.....!"

Even when I shouted, Rashiok didn't show any signs of reacting to my voice. He increased the volume of his roaring instead, and fixed his gaze upon me as if I was his prey.

Am I going to have to kill him? Will I be able to do it?

-Also, blades are ineffective, they'll bounce off his scales easily, and I might injure myself. I either have to aim for his eyes, or his open mouth.

When I thought about the possibility I would have to kill him, my mind already began to race on effective methods to kill my opponent. The sword will be ineffective. So, I should switch to the spear. Since Rashiok is so huge, I can't let him corner me in a confined area. The spear is currently spinning around on the ground between me and Rashiok. If I jump for it..... can I make it in time?

I could feel my body rapidly increasing in sluggishness. I don't have the confidence to say I can avoid his next charge. So, I'm going to have to go for the spear immediately.

I made my decision instantly. I kicked the muddy ground so hard, that I almost tripped and fell. As if lured by my movements, Rashiok came running as well.

The mud on my shoes caused me to slip, so I grabbed the spear handle while tumbling on the ground. Just as I managed to right myself, Rashiok's open mouth was already in front of me.

Reflexively – I used the long spear to block his teeth from chewing down on me.

I myself was surprised at my instant reaction. The momentum from Rashiok's charge pushed me back however, and my head hit the ground.

Suddenly, I felt a pressure being applied to my left arm. Is he playing with his prey, like a wild beast?

“Ah, ahhh!!”

My throbbing shoulder caused me to scream in pain again, and I also saw my red blood flying out from a gash on my left arm. I heard Rashiok making a sound from his throat as if he didn't want to do this.

In addition to the pain, something else was making my vision go blurry. I wasn't able to see Rashiok's unfocused eyes in front of me clearly anymore.

Damn it, why is it at this time, that my tears would well up.....

Although Rashiok let out several sounds of reluctance, he wasn't able to stop himself. Why must I fight with him in a life or death struggle? Even though I helped bring him up myself before he even opened his eyes. This beautiful beast, that was always at my side, am I going to have to kill him?

-It's impossible. I can't do it. Even if I die, I don't want to do it.

My arm is trembling. The tears from my eyes rolled down and washed away some of the mud on me.

Still, no matter what I feel, or how much I cry, it won't help persuade this beast that's lost its sense of reason to let me live. Even though I raised him up myself.

In the instant that his teeth got stuck on the spear I was still holding on to, I kicked at Rashiok's defenseless throat exposed in front of me with all my might. I surprised even myself with my half-unconscious acrobatics, as Rashiok wailed in pain and I used this chance to get a good grip on my spear again.

Alright, let's die. In this current situation, when your body collapses, it'll probably crush me under it, and we can die together.



However, my spear didn't pierce his flesh like I had expected. Suddenly Rashiok began roaring thunderously, and his gigantic body took flight above me. I heard the sound of some object falling onto the mud. It was something big, that was beautiful and reddish-violet colored.

It felt like as if my heart was being squeezed by a hand of ice. Rashiok was making sounds of agonizing excruciation, and I was crying for him as well.

"-Are you alright!?"

".....Oscar?"

An adult's arm picked me up from the mud I was wallowing in. His usually serious voice was tinged with anxiety, and I finally said his name after catching my breath.

"I thought you would die....., no, my apologies, this happened right after I left your side."

No need to apologize, I was the one who ordered you to leave my side to fetch the evidence against Viscount Ogren. I shook my head slowly.

"How, is, Rashiok?"

My voice was weak and choppy. My lungs feel bruised, and hurt terribly.

".....I cut off one of his wings."

A wing. -I see. The sound of pain as Rashiok kept thrashing about in this bog-like area continued to increase in volume.

"Rashiok..... Rashiok!!"

I wonder if the pain will be able to dissolve the brainwashing. It was a faint – a tiny hope that I clung to as I called him.

But, indeed, he responded to me. Through his roars of suffering, although it was weak, Rashiok did respond to me just the way he always did.

".....Rashiok,"

In the end, that woman – things happened just like she said it would. She put me into a situation where I had to kill Rashiok, no matter how much I didn't want to, stabbing through my heart all over. Just like she said she would do, she successfully shattered my heart into pieces.

However – both Rashiok and I are still alive. I'm injured all over, one of his wings has been cut off, and yet, we're still alive. Neither our bodies, nor our spirits, were broken entirely in this battle we were forced to fight against each other.

The heart isn't like paper or a piece of cloth. As long as the heart can still see hope, it can be mended again.

Oscar wiped my tears for me as they kept flowing out. He also had the foresight to caress my cheeks, and soon his hand was replaced by Rashiok's warm, moist tongue that still had life in it as he licked me.

CHAPTER 137

WINGS OF WIND

I washed all the mud off my body with what little water remained in the broken fountain, then with Oscar holding on to me, both of us got onto Rashiok's now one-winged back.

Rashiok and I are both at our limits. However, they've kidnapped Feria. Also – that woman, Diferis, I want to kill her more than anyone else, in this chaos today while I have the chance.

That woman's ability is way too dangerous. I can't allow her to get away, and there's also the fact that she wants to kill me just as much.

"Please, it's unreasonable to push yourself any further!"

"I know. My apologies, I'll have to leave any fighting up to you, Oscar."

"Anyone that would make you fight in your current injured state would have to be heartless."

Then, Oscar continued speaking.

"You're not a knight, you're the commander, and I'm not a civil servant, I'm a knight. That's how it originally should have been.I'm so sorry for my late arrival."



Since Oscar was more accustomed to riding on a draconis than I expected, we were able to push our limits, and tracking down Diferis and Feria wasn't that difficult.

A black cloud of fire moths was swarming on top of the central area in the commoners' district. There were fires everywhere, but dark clouds were also gathering right now above the royal capital. Are they intending to escape under the cover of rain? More than the dark clouds though, the sky was almost completely blackened by smoke.

“If it starts to rain, their scent will be erased by the rain, and Rashiok won’t be able to track them any more.....”

“We have to catch up to them before then!”

As if in response to Oscar’s tone of urgency, Rashiok’s feet began kicking off from the building rooftops with increasing speed. Even though he lost one of his wings, his agility was still amazing to behold as he lightly jumped through the air. Even with the current situation, I have to thank Earl Terejia. He was the one who helped me meet such a splendid draconis.

Rashiok uttered a low growl. I could already see the rooftop in question. There was a huge mass of fire moths above it, with a huge buzzing sound. Diferis was standing in the church plaza, and seemed like she was dancing while controlling the fire moths. Those toxic purple tattoos were drawing patterns in the air again, and the fire moth flocks acted as if they were puppets attached to strings coming from her hands.

It was a fantastical scene to behold, one that couldn’t get any weirder. I shook off my body’s painful memories that it brought up in my left hand. Next to the dancing Diferis, I saw Feria sitting there listlessly on the ground. I lightly tapped on Rashiok’s neck.

“Let’s go!”

With my voice as the cue, he jumped straight for Diferis who was on a three-story building’s roof. For a magical beast whose natural habitat is the treacherous cliffs and the snow-covered Amon Nor mountain range, something like this is nothing.

She must have noticed us descending upon her, Diferis’s expression suddenly changed and she backed away from where she was standing. I took this chance to make my next moves together with Oscar and Rashiok.

Rashiok picked Feria up in his mouth, and instantly left this location. Oscar drew his sword and headed straight for Diferis, while I slipped behind one of the church’s statues. I suppressed an urge to cough from my weakened body.

“So you came after all, hey, you’re getting really annoying!!”

Shing, a sharp sound hung in the air after Diferis deflected Oscar’s sword aiming for her heart with a large knife. They traded several successive blows with their weapons,

and Oscar could only stay on the defensive, having to block her dagger with his one-handed longsword.

An incredible buzzing sound suddenly arose from the fire moth swarms, and this time they went after Oscar.

This is the first time I'm seeing his combat abilities, and while he's not bad, his movements are too inflexible. He's definitely not a monster of Claudia's caliber. His aristocratic swordsmanship is too ceremonial.

However, as if representative of his steadfast nature, his style is extremely simple, it's the very essence of consistency and reliability.

"Now then, if you don't want to become fuel for the fire today, dance for me as much as you can!!"

Her high-pitched frenzied shouting was soon swallowed up completely by the deafening buzzing sound of countless fire moths.

While Oscar has considerable ability as a warrior, there's a limit to what he can do by himself. With fire moths everywhere in the air, flying irregularly, gradually he was no longer able to close the distance to Diferis anymore.

"Ahahaha, come on come on, dance more for me!!"

Her dancing increased in fervor. Also, the number of moths now flying near the ground around us increased even more.

This time, there's no convenient water source close by that we can use and blow up. Diferis seemed to be giving it everything she had, and sent a red wave of fire moths at Oscar.

Impatience seeped into Oscar's expression. Swish, he immediately cut off his knight outfit when it began smoking, and numerous fire moths kept trying to get close to him.

I held my breath while staying in the statue's shadow, and kept my gaze on everything occurring. It felt like I was watching an animated painting, as Oscar kept dancing with death with the fire moths trying their utmost to kill him.

My role is to act as the eyes currently. I have to see what Oscar can't. Just as he said, I'm not a knight, and he is.

I removed all unnecessary actions and emotions, and made my mind into ice –

“To your right, Oscar! Aim for her blind spot!!”

-As I expected, Diferis's magic depended on her vision. Since I sliced her left eye earlier, it seems that it's affected her eyesight quite considerably, although I doubt it was serious enough to make her go blind in that eye. When I observed her calmly and coldly, it appeared that the fire moth groups on her left side lacked precision in their movements.

I think that her flashy dancing is misleading, whenever she attempted to control Rashiok, or gave some new orders to the fire moths, she had to have her target in her line of sight. Being able to exert some partial dominance and give some simple commands while letting the target be in auto mode, or manually controlling the target's movements, it seems that her magic can work both ways.

Diferis seemed surprised for an instant, and as if lured by my voice, she looked away from Oscar. She presented her back to Oscar, while she faced my direction, where I was hiding behind the statue.

She pointed her fingers at the sky above me. All the glittering red fire moths in the area, immediately rushed straight for me.

“Burn to death, you brat!!!”

My vision is dyed pure black right now.

I'm holding my breath. My body is in such a tense, excited state that it's like I don't have any energy.

-You're the one who's going to die here, Diferis!!

As a wall of fire moths approached me, a draconis wing opened up and blew them away with all its power. Woosh, the sound of the wind was strong. I was almost blown away as well, I had to desperately cling on to the statue.

The sudden gale easily pushed all the individually light fire moths back in the direction from where they came.

There was a wail of despair from Diferis mixed in with all the sounds, and – just for an instant, it changed to a final scream of death.

In the middle of the plaza where fire moths had scattered everywhere, Oscar's sword had penetrated her chest.

When he pulled his sword out, her tan body collapsed onto the ground. She was still convulsing slightly, and bright red blood was spreading out quickly.

The fire moths were dancing in confusion, but as if attracted by her blood, they slowly started gathering to Diferis while she was on the verge of death.

She finally stopped making any noise entirely.

The smell of her burning flesh began to trigger nausea in me from my old unpleasant memories.

-But, I won. I've definitely succeeded in having her killed.

It's, my, victory.

CHAPTER 138

MEETING OF THE JUGFENA REGION DOMAINS

The major fire disaster that occurred in the commoners' district of the royal capital was finally extinguished with the help of the rain, two days after it began. The number of dead people was estimated at roughly 700 to 800, and the priests and nobles of the kingdom were making efforts everywhere to support the commoners.

Also, as for a few nobles that unfortunately got caught up in this fire – Viscount Rogshia, Viscount Ogren, and Viscountess Kaldia, who were having a trial at a church near the commoners' district, the House of Lords was thrown into a state of confusion about their matters.

According to the surviving priest's testimony, he reported to the House of Lords through the church that Viscounts Rogshia and Ogren were under suspicion of illegal narcotics manufacturing, smuggling, and tax evasion, and that two unidentified men connected to Viscount Ogren attacked us.

With that lead to go on, after being made aware of the facts, a large-scale undercover investigation was done by the church to root out corrupt nobles. Among those caught were nobles from the north and the southwest inland region of Evitonis, which caused a huge uproar because Evitonis is the sacred land that the church founder Kusha Fema came from, so it was a problem to find out some of the ruling class there was corrupt.

With that as the catalyst, Chief Priest Faris from Shanak Temple forcibly conducted an investigation against all the church branches in the Evitonis region. The terrible news that the church, which should have been the guardian of the law, was also discovered to be corrupt during the course of the investigation. About half of the churches in the Evitonis region were declared excommunicated from the Church of Arxia, and with the charges brought against them of misusing judicial authority, many people lost their social statuses all at once.

“So, the ones secretly pulling the strings behind the curtains were Marquis Nordsturm, and this Western Alfena Church?”

“That's correct.”

After the incident, the corpse of Marquis Nordsturm, leader of the northern nobles, was discovered. This was also information that was concealed from the public. His funeral was carried out quietly in secret, and the nobles only know that his successor only inherited a low-ranked noble title for some reason.

There were rumors that he couldn't bear the disadvantageous evidence piling up against him, and that he committed suicide, but the truth is unclear. The new leader of the Nordsturm family was his eldest, and also said to be his only son, a young man with wheat-yellow hair like his father. Melchior disappeared during the incident, and hasn't been found since.

".....Is all of this really true? That you fought a member of the Western Alfena Church which infiltrated Arxia. Not only that, your opponent had a mysterious ability to control monsters?"

"The one who killed her was Oscar Terejia, knight to my guardian Earl Terejia. All of the dead bodies from our fight were taken by Chief Priest Faris of Shanak Temple. One of the corpses died due to draconis bites, please confirm it with Chief Priest Faris. As for her ability, there's no physical evidence of it. Currently the church is investigating the dead bodies."

Margrave Genas who was sitting directly across from me was stroking his thick brown beard as he asked me questions with doubt in his voice. Ergnade sitting in a chair by my side nodded with a hmm as if he was deeply interested in this subject.

"Well, seeing Viscountess Kaldia's injured state, I think there's no need to doubt her words. As for her draconis' wing, I completely believe what she has said. This Jugfena region domain meeting is a good chance for all of us to remove our internal disagreements and unite together, so I think continuing to ask if her words are true or false is insignificant."

Ergnade who was here on the behalf of the Jugfena royal domain's..... no, I should say as the representative, backed me up in front of Margrave Genas.

After such a major incident within the royal capital, big changes occurred in the domestic situation. One example of this was the heir to the Jugfena royal domain, Earl Einsbark's second son Wiegraf, taking over for him in the political arena.

For a domain where the position is usually appointed instead of inherited, this would usually become a huge topic of discussion, but thanks to the sudden change in the domestic situation, it's been buried by other topics.

From all the incidents that happened, there was parts where the church and the House of Lords intentionally withheld information from the public. Diferis's existence, my involvement and fight with her, the reason for the fire moths' abnormal behavior, basically most of the information about my involvement wasn't made known publicly.

I don't know what their intention is, but Earl Terejia and I have already decided to conceal our involvement. The only exception is at this Jugfena region domain meeting. As Ergnade just said, this is the time to come together, so we should share as much information that may be relevant to border defense as possible.

So I shared my knowledge about an unknown ability to control monsters, and the terrorist that infiltrated Arxia and the incident she caused, as this isn't the place to conceal such information.

Margrave Genas glanced over at my bandages. I barely got any sleep and rode Rashiok overnight to get here to this meeting on time, but according to my doctor, I need to obediently rest in my bed for an entire month in order to recover.

I forcibly fixed my dislocated shoulder, I have a laceration in my arm, and I had a hole drilled through my left hand. I was told that continuing to fight in this condition would of course be impossibly unreasonable, and that scars and impediments using my left arm in the future may remain. It's possible for it to recover full functionality with rehabilitation, but time and patience will be necessary.

".....This entire uproar, was caused by the Western Alfena Church sect from Densel. Meaning, this is a complete loss for our Arxia. She's successively caused massive chaos within Arxia, and together with the loss in noble rank of so many people, the number of Royal Knights have greatly decreased. She's successfully managed to greatly weaken our national power and combat capabilities."

Margrave Genas sighed, and looked up at the sky. He was looking out the window to the east, and his wrinkled face showed signs of bitterness.

"One fortunate thing among all this misfortune, was that my father had decided to reorganize the command structure at Jugfena right before the incident. The system of command at Jugfena isn't under much chaos right now. Originally, my older brother

Wiegraf the strategist, was in a position where he could command both the knights and the army. If you compensate for the loss of personnel, you can organize a new command structure quickly.”

“I believe that Earl Einsbark’s current age greatly exceeds that of the average soldier. -I’ve heard that the injuries he received a few years ago are affecting his strength, how is he doing.....”

He’s referring to the defensive battle three years ago at Fort Jugfena which was smoothed over into nothing, it was a war in which Earl Einsbark wasn’t even able to swing about his weapons to his satisfaction. Earl Einsbark’s domain is technically a northern domain, and his position is conferred upon him. There’s a rumor going around that Earl Einsbark may be promoted to Marquis this month, and that the territory confiscated from the corrupt northern nobles will be given to him.

“It’s not as if resting is the only thing he can do anymore, so it’s not all that bad. My eldest brother Volmar is also doing his best to manage the affairs of the domain, so that takes some of the burden off him.”

“Ah, I see.”

Since the second son Wiegraf is becoming the heir and entering politics, the eldest son Volmar is helping with running the domain more now, and had to resign from the Jugfena Fortress knight order. Since currently there was a shortage of noble candidates and the House of Lords was busy dealing with the aftermath of the fire moth incident, the two older Einsbark sons that were both accomplished in their own right acquired power just like that.

“.....I would like to propose that we proactively share information with each other from now on, how about it? There’s so much information coming from my Genas domain that it’s too difficult to sift through it all, so I think it should be fine for both your domains to assist me.”

Right after we finished talking about domestic affairs, Margrave Genas himself proposed that we share information. Ergnade and I agreed to this with no hesitation whatsoever.

And so, the first Jugfena region domains meeting succeeded in strengthening our ties, and we decided that we would hold such a meeting again in the future.

CHAPTER 139

REUNION

This happened right after our meeting concluded. Ergnade softened his strict expression, and beckoned for me to come over. Hm? When I tilted my head and followed him while puzzled, he leaned over and met my eyes with a deep gaze.

“.....It’s only been three years, but you’ve grown so much, Viscountess Kaldia. In the past, I wouldn’t have been able to meet your line of sight unless I was crouching down.”

“Ah, is that the case? It seems like you haven’t changed all that much.”

“I’ve already finished my growth period long ago. The only thing that’s going to happen to my appearance from now on is that I’ll get older.”

His eyes were twinkling with mischief, although there were more wrinkles around his eyes than the last time I saw him. He’s beginning to resemble his father Earl Einsbark even more. More so than three years ago, the last time I saw him.

“How’s Oscar doing? I heard that he became your knight.”

“You know him? I thought that he wasn’t one of your direct subordinates.”

“He has the blood of the Terejia family. He’s not someone that I should know nothing about.”

.....Well, it’s indeed as he says. Although Oscar’s grandmother was born to a different mother, she was still a half-sister of Marquis Rittergua and Earl Terejia. With such a powerful noble family like the Terejias, it would be difficult to ignore Oscar’s existence, even if he was only a distant relative.

“He’s a capable fellow. He’s similar to Earl Terejia, and quite efficient in his work.”

“He tends to get overly passionate about what he’s doing. Since you’re so overworked, it’s a good thing for you to have a subordinate like him.”

“Ah, well, yes.”

Ergnade sat down on a sofa, and motioned me towards a sofa opposite of him. If he wants me to sit, he must have something else to talk about. I obediently sat down across from him like he wanted.

“I’ll get straight to the point. Earl Terejia himself requested something of me.”

“.....Does it have something to do with me?”

Earl Terejia requested something from Ergnade. I was lost for words for a moment in surprise. To my knowledge, the Einsbark family and Terejia family aren’t deeply connected, but it wouldn’t surprise me if Earl Terejia had personal connections with them. However, for Earl Terejia to directly make a request to Ergnade, I could only think that it had something to do with me.

Over the past few years, Earl Terejia’s body’s condition had deteriorated, and I faintly detected with him summoning his relative Oscar to aid me that perhaps he was also preparing to share more and more of his duties running the Kaldia domain with everyone. If he keeps overworking himself like that, I feel as if he may die within the year, and I’d actually prefer that he get some rest for himself so that I also know to prepare to find a new guardian.Unlike before, I’m getting increasingly worried that something may happen to him at any time.

“Yes, it mainly has to do with you. I’ll skip the details of his request. Basically, he wants to know if you would like to become my daughter.”

.....Wha?

I couldn’t help but furrow my eyebrows and I took a good look at Ergnade which told me he was being serious.

Become his, daughter? Me, and him?

“.....You’re thinking about adoption?”

“Nope. Not adoption, but legally taking on my family name. This method – it seems that you don’t know about it.”

Ergnade gave me a simple explanation, that taking on the Einsbark name wouldn’t confer any new legal responsibilities on me at all. He told me not to overthink it, this is quite simple, he said quite naturally. It’s just as if he was lending me his family name.

-I can't comprehend. What does he get out of all this?

Is there something behind this proposal of his? But for the second generation of a major noble military family, to support a young girl from a small domain with a reputation for infamy, I could only think that they would receive unnecessary hardships.

"Hey, I already told you this isn't such a hard thing to decide. Taking on the family name isn't for the sake of any benefits. In ancient times, it was a way to have even closer ties to people you really liked, that you considered family. If you happen to be unsatisfied with me, feel free to say no, but if you decide you like me then just go ahead and say yes!"

"Ahh....."

"Well, don't worry for my sake, I do gain something from this as well. Right now I'm currently under pressure from my family to have children. I'm not even married yet so it can't be helped, and giving you my family name will give me a daughter, it'll be good for me as well."

It's quite a common story, and it struck a chord with me. Ergnade's currently twenty-seven years old right now. Now that he's become the leader of the Jugfena knights, it's probably expected of him to have children as well.

"I don't think that just because you take me in, that the voices wanting you to have children will disappear....."

"Oh, but there is a way to quiet them. Then maybe I should say that I don't mind just giving you my family name, how about I adopt you as well, eh. I think that when people hear your name, they'll fall silent. Your name is beginning to get known as a warrior. After this incident, probably even more so."

As I tilted my head, Ergnade added the ambiguous comment that "you're not just any simple child, after all."

"By the way, hasn't my father already talked to you about taking on our family name?"

"Oh, no, not yet. You must be joking?"

“Who knows,” Ergnade just grinned like a cat as he chuckled, he was probably joking I suppose. And, without noticing, all the tension in my shoulders was finally gone. This warm, relaxing feeling, where Ergnade cared for me and always tried to relieve my tension, was just like I remembered it, without changing.

“Since Earl Terejia went to the trouble of requesting you, I have no objections.”

“I see. Well then, from now on you’ll be known as my daughter.”

“Indeed so. Then, please continue to take good care of me from now on.”

“Well, nothing much will change, really.”

After a surprisingly plain and simple discussion for such an eventful matter, on that day, I acquired an adoptive father. When I tried calling him father though, apparently I got an incredibly strange expression on my face, so I think I’ll just continue to call him Ergnade.

CHAPTER 140

UNDERGROUND DRUG TRADE

When I met Earl Freche's youngest son Cornell again, autumn was just about to end. It was around the time when the commotion over summer's incidents was finally dying down.

With only a minimal number of servants, I received Cornell in my plain drawing room and served him black tea, and we got straight to the main point after briefly exchanging pleasantries.

".....That thing you mentioned, is this it?"

He brought out a cream-colored lump with a tense expression on his face. I took it from him, and handed it to Ratoka behind me who was wearing a veil. Ratoka confirmed the aroma for me, and tapped my shoulder. That's the signal that there's no mistake.

"It seems that this is correct. Thank you for your troubles, Cornell Freche. With this, our deal is now complete."

".....I'm glad to hear that. This is a load off my shoulders."

He rubbed his hand over his heart in relief, and kept anxiously looking over at the lump in Ratoka's hands.

"Um, is this really alright? I mean, that's..... it's what caused such an uproar in the royal capital, right....."

"This is the addictive beeswax, so of course it caused that commotion."

"I knew it....."

As I nodded in confirmation, his face paled. I told him that there wouldn't be any problems.

“Starting from tomorrow, this beeswax will become a ‘controlled medicine’ that can be traded.”

“Controlled, medicine?”

“Indeed. A licensed doctor’s prescription will be required, but any noble can purchase it. They must acknowledge that side effects may occur, and only take it according to a doctor’s instructions. Arxia has decided to regulate this drug and control its supply.”

In Arxia, there’s laws and a system preventing the use of dangerous drugs, any drugs classified as dangerous would be banned from being manufactured, sold, or taken. While there is a system in place for licensing doctors, the mortality rate remains high because the medical knowledge in this world isn’t that advanced yet.By the way, Arxia’s average lifespan is still higher than the neighboring countries.

Younger noble boys that aren’t heirs often go down the path of becoming a doctor, but there’s still not enough research and medicine available. If anything is recognized to be harmful to the human body, it doesn’t matter what type of effects it has, it will become regulated. Since medicine and drugs go hand in hand, so technological innovations in both fields have been slow to progress.

.....I haven’t done anything all that remarkable. It’s just that during the final dance parties of this season, I just talked to some adults about my own ideas. I had many opportunities to chat with nobles that lost some of their family members to drug addiction, as well as nobles that had domains where medicinal herb production was thriving.

“Renvia flowers – in particular its resin, it does have addictive properties, but the symptoms are light compared to most other regulated drugs. It doesn’t have much of an effect unless it’s used frequently and daily. Also, it has a history as a folk remedy for being a treatment for forest syndrome.”

“Forest syndrome?”

“.....Ahh, you don’t hear about this disease much in the south. Forest syndrome is a type of respiratory problem caused by inflammation in the bronchial tract due to inhaling powder from a type of cotton butterfly monster that lives symbiotically with cypress trees. Since the north has many cypress forests, these butterfly monsters are very common. These butterflies avoid the scent of the Renvia flower, and its smoke seems to have easing, anti-inflammatory properties. I prepared a lot of information on

its medicinal properties in advance, which I also gave to your father, and it was decided that this would be certified as the first regulated medicinal drug.”

I could tell that Cornell was confused as he only said eh, ah, and um, so I subtly moved my line of sight away from him. When I tilted my head, he looked down as if he was greatly relieved.

“My apologies. There were probably many words you haven’t heard before, that you didn’t know the meaning of.”

“.....Ah, no. I wasn’t being considerate.”

In this world, medical knowledge is mostly only for experts, so medical vocabulary isn’t widely known. Many common words that I know because of my knowledge from a previous life aren’t typically taught even to nobles.

Recently I’ve only been talking to nobles that are experts in medicine and pharmacology, so I’d forgotten to watch what I say.This time was my mistake.

“To explain things simply, the Renvia flower can be used as a medicine for some northern regional diseases. It’s easier to use after being processed as beeswax.”

“You’ve made it quite a lot easier than your previous explanation.”

“If you want to know the details, ask your father. I’m sure that you’ll probably be deeply involved in the future as well.”

At any rate, this will become the main business of his future wife-to-be’s domain. More than anyone else, Cornell should go and learn some knowledge from Earl Freche.

“Well, that’s true. -Then, this ends our deal. I’m deeply grateful for all your assistance, Lord Kaldia.”

“Not at all, same to you.”

CHAPTER 141

MY BEST WISHES TO YOU

Tap, tap, I knocked on the door. I heard the maid Maya replying “yes?” from inside.

“Excuse me, Elise-dono.”

“Eliza-sama!”

A smile bloomed just like a flower on Elise’s face as she called out my name. Today as well she was resting on her bed with the window closed, and her complexion didn’t seem well. It seems that she’s been having more seizures again recently, and she’s staying bedridden with a weak body.

“I’m glad that you’ve been visiting so often lately.”

“Not at all..... I just come by whenever I’m free. But, well, I don’t mind coming to visit Elise-dono once in a while, although this time I have another reason for seeing you.”

“You do?”

Elise’s eyes were round, and she closed her eyelids ambiguously. She has an innocent smile, but it also seems like she’s given up. It’s definitely a hard thing to accept, having your illness get worse again when you’ve gotten better before. Although, her symptoms should still be lighter now than when she first came to my domain.....

“Elise-dono, I have something I would like to give to you.”

“Yes? What is it?”

As she tilted her head, when she saw the inscrutable person whose gender and age were both a mystery dressed in white behind me, her eyes became like round saucers in astonishment.

“.....Oh, is this the girl?”

Elise glanced over very interestedly at Priest Faris' veil, and behind Priest Faris, Ratoka nonchalantly came in as well.

"This person here, is Priest Faris. Priest Faris is a licensed national doctor, so I troubled this person to come see you today. Elise-dono, I also informed your father and uncle in advance already, so please rest assured."

At the words licensed national doctor, Elise's mouth went wide agape and a small gasp escaped from her.

National doctors are extremely rare. The test to become one requires much medical knowledge, and the high test fee narrows the candidates down even fewer, and of the doctors that do take the test, fewer than half will pass.

Basically, the national doctor's license program was launched as a qualification to become a royal physician, and it's basically not needed at the local level. As they're required to handle the controlled drugs, their number will probably increase in the future, but currently there's fewer than 50 licensed national doctors.

"It seems to be forest syndrome. Would it be alright to ask you some questions about your illness?"

"Ahh..... Of course."

Elise seemed confused at everything that happened so suddenly, but seeing me nod at her affirmatively, she was able to relax.

"I'll be in your care."

Priest Faris inquired about how frequent her coughing was, how serious her seizures were, and when she would have them. Elise answered most of the questions, and occasionally her maid Maya would add some details as well.

After Priest Faris finished the medical diagnosis, she wrote a medical permit that's sort of like a prescription and handed it to me, giving her permission for Feria to burn the Renvia beeswax candle for fifteen minutes every day, in order to reduce her seizures and telling her to burn it especially during the seizures. As I took the permit, I asked "will this be alright?"

“Repeat attacks are common with forest syndrome seizures. If your mind and body are weak, coughing will increase even if there are no cotton butterflies around anymore. Symptoms are also dependent on age, so they should lighten as she gets older and her body matures, so please make sure to keep a positive state of mind as much as possible.”

As expected of a holy person, I’m impressed that she can say such things as well. Just hearing this will convey a sense of relief.

“Yes.”

“It’ll be alright, while the royal capital area does have more cypress trees than Kaldia does, cotton butterflies almost never fly near the noble district and the noble school. Most of the trees are basically outside the huge city. Your symptoms won’t worsen if you come to the royal capital.”

Pat pat, Priest Faris even patted Elise’s shoulder as if to comfort her, while Ratoka and I listened silently.

It was only recently that I noticed Elise’s seizures would become more severe whenever she had to leave Kaldia. Since she’s about to turn thirteen years old, she’s going to be required to attend noble school next spring. I was worried about her having to leave this domain that’s beneficial for her recuperation, and of course she’ll have more pain as well if her seizures increase. And according to Ratoka, Elise was more attached to life in Kaldia than I believed.

“.....Elise-dono. In the royal capital, it’ll be easier to meet with your father and uncle. I’ll also be living there during each summer. I believe that the winters in Sherstok were colder than Kaldia’s to begin with, so you should be able to handle the royal capital’s weather.”

“Eliza-sama.....”

Priest Faris slipped out of the room without a sound. I walked up to Elise’s bedside near her pillow, to fill in the empty space where Priest Faris just was.

Thirteen years old. In Arxia, this age means you’re almost an adult, and many laws will treat you equal to adults. However, this girl in front of me still only thinks that I’m an unreliable child.

At this moment, I saw for the first time an expression from Elise that seemed like she was about to cry. This is despite the fact that she's already been in Kaldia for three and a half years now.

Elise would rarely let her anxiety show, because she didn't want to worry her family.Even though she has a great relationship with her affectionate family, it doesn't mean that she doesn't suffer. Maybe it's impossible for someone like me who killed her own family personally to completely empathize with her, but it's not a good idea for me to ignore emotions I can't understand.

My world is such a heavy one to bear. Pain and suffering are so close to me, much more so than in the world of the memories left to me.

".....In winter, I probably won't be able to visit this domain anymore?"

To Elise's tiny little desire, I could only shake my head and answer:

"I'm afraid not."

Is that so, was her reply as her shoulders drooped in disappointment. Honestly, I wanted to say that I didn't mind if she came over whenever she liked. Even though I haven't visited her all that much, having a gentle, kind-hearted girl close to me where I can visit her any time I want, it's a wonderful healing experience for my heart.

However, it won't come true anymore. There's a high chance that she won't ever visit Kaldia again in her lifetime.

A formal protest has arrived in Arxia from the Planates Dukedom regarding the treatment of Prince Albert. When Prince Albert was forced into the monastery, it basically meant that he lost the right to attend noble school. For being born a noble, just what type of unfair treatment is it that he isn't able to go the noble school that's required by law to attend, this sort of protest.

The protest was a strong condemnation, and sharply criticized Arxia for the insult to the Planates bloodline. The disappearance of the Rindarl Kingdom could now happen at any moment.

It's a very dangerous situation, with the only potentially friendly country of Planates in the future Rindarl Union making a formal protest to us at this timing right before the Rindarl Union will be formed.

.....Everyone is concerned about the relationship with the neighboring country. Especially when I was at the meeting of the Jugfena region domains earlier, our domains made plans to increase our military armaments and prepared for the possible outbreak of war.

I kept all of these matters to myself, and gently presented the box of beeswax I had in my hand to Elise.

“This is what I was referring to earlier when I said I have something to give to you. I’ll be really happy if you accept it.”

“What’s this?”

“A type of beeswax that’s also a medicine to treat forest syndrome. You must follow the law and Priest Faris’s instructions when using it, but there should be a beneficial effect for your seizures.”

Elise looked at the box placed on her knee with a look of amazement. Of course, medicine is rather expensive in Arxia. And for the Renvia beeswax which is now a controlled medicine, it’s probably going to be one of the most expensive to prescribe.

“Whenever you’re feeling better, please come and visit my summer townhouse in the capital. It’s a bit of a small, ramshackle house, but..... you’re welcome anytime.”

CHAPTER 142

SNOW AND DRACONIS

As usual for this time of year, thick snow was piling up outside yesterday. Today a light powder is falling soundlessly, further increasing the thickness of the snow.

When I arrived at the dining hall for breakfast, Claudia was chatting with Earl Terejia, Bellway, and Mrs. Marshan about something, and she greeted me with an energetic “good morning!” when she noticed me. I greeted all of them as well, and took a seat after asking the cook Boswef to make me something in the kitchen.

Maybe it was a coincidence, Oscar and Mrs. Hortensia came in right this time as well, along with Elise who was feeling better lately and her maid Maya.

The dining hall at my Mansion of Golden Hills is now completely filled. Is this the first time that so many people have gathered here all at the same time, I wonder?

Everyone in the mansion that has some sort of social status is currently here. I heard Earl Terejia muttering under his breath to himself about how unusual this all was.

“.....Various different kinds of people have lived together in this mansion up until now. Looking at all this again, I think it’s all so interesting.”

As Oscar, who was the newest person here, made a comment, I mentally agreed with him.

Earl Terejia, Bellway, Mrs. Marshan, Claudia, Elise, Mrs. Hortensia, and Oscar. Before I realized it, the number of people living here increased to be more than the number of family members I killed with poison before.Thinking about it like this gives me profound emotions.

Earl Terejia and Elise are going to leave this mansion next spring, however. Also, Mrs. Hortensia will probably also leave once I reach teenage age and a quasi-adult status, having finished her role as my nanny.

Perhaps, the concept known as family was originally such that members will leave the household little by little. No, not all families are like this though. As someone with

memories from a previous world, someone with the experience of killing all of her own family, I know better than anyone.



As the snow fell in the dim light, Rashiok was rolling around on the snow excitedly. The snow from this morning is soft and easy to walk around in. My cold weather clothing, a woolen cloak, is exasperating to deal with though. It's so heavy even though it only reaches to my knee, but when the hems brush against the snow, it absorbs water and becomes even heavier.

As I expected, I really think that I can't bring myself to enjoy winter.

Maybe it's a sign of my growth, I feel like it's not as difficult to walk in heavy clothes as it used to be, but I dislike this sense of inhibited movement. I buried most of my face in my scarf, and I followed behind Rashiok without a word as he turned around in the snow.

We descended the hill, and plowed through the snow-covered fields to reach Claria village. There were lights on in the village, but it was so quiet everywhere that you could hear a pin drop.

This is typical of midwinter. Every house has its doors and windows tightly shut, they'll add extra wood to the fireplace, and each family will quietly sit around the fireplace together, and not waste unnecessary energy. They might not be sleeping, but it's really similar to hibernation.

I watched everything in this peaceful silence for a while, and warmed my hands with a glass bottle of hot black tea. Rashiok kept bouncing up and down in the village square, which had no footprints other than his.

I paid a visit to the village mayor's house, and asked if there was anything that was worrying him or giving him trouble recently. The mayor nodded and told me there wasn't anything at the moment, so I told him I'd come check things out again the next time it's snowing weakly like this.

I rode on Rashiok's back and headed for the next village. I watched the scene of snow-covered trees passing by me silently, at a speed that would be impossible for humans. However, this is normal for a draconis, even with a human riding on his back.

Pat pat, I stroked Rashiok's empty right shoulder where there was now a missing wing. I laid myself down against him, and although I still think it's cold, his remaining wing opened up slightly and blocked the wind for me.

I don't know exactly how it works, but it seems that the draconis manipulates wind magic using its wing as the starting point. This was something that Oscar knew already, and he taught it to me right before my battle with Diferis. That's how I was able to plan for Rashiok to use his magic in his remaining wing to create a strong gust of wind.

Some materials obtained from magical beasts' bodies are able to retain a portion of their magic power, such as crystallized fire moth scales that usually act a source of light in this world. Of course, it can't be used forever though, it's just like a battery, it will run out of power one day.

Rashiok's wing that was cut off no longer has the power to control wind, but it's been stored in a warehouse after being treated with preservative chemicals. It seems that the light and durable film of the draconis wing will be incorporated into my personal armor one day in the future when my body matures.

I will use my draconis's wing that was cut off, for as long as possible. I feel like I have an obligation, this is the least I can do.

"Rashiok....."

Sorry, and thank you, neither expression managed to make it out of my throat, I ended up not saying anything at all. Rashiok's long snake-like tail that moves freely stroked me on my left shoulder that I don't move very much these days. Although we're a human and a draconis, we understand each other better than anyone else.

I'm glad that you're here with me. I'm really happy that I didn't end up killing you.

I remembered another day just like this when I was outside walking in the snow, and I felt sentimental, thinking about the person who's now only in my memories.

Every time something happens, it feels almost like a little bit of me is being scraped away from the edges, it's a gruesome idea that's been sticking with me.

For me to have changed to where I was happy just because we were alive, and being grateful that I didn't have to kill Rashiok. A sigh containing self-derision escaped from me.

How did it become this way? This world was supposed to be from an otome game.And yet I'd gotten used to thinking that this dark way of life was normal. Just how did it get like this?

All these oppressive emotions, swirled down into my chest as if they were snowflakes that wouldn't melt. As I laid face down on Rashiok's back, I took long, deep breaths, and exhaled until my lungs were empty.

Author note: This chapter ends the childhood period of Eliza's story.

